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> NBA PLAYOFFS

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The Pistons and Celtics took different roads to get here, but now they're exactly where we want them-going head to head, with a trip to The Finals on the line. By Stan McNeal

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That depends on whether you win the Stanley Cup or fall painfully short trying. By Chuck Gormley

> ALL-ACCESS: DIRTY JOBS

STORY 18 Someone has to do it

We watch sports for the touchdowns, dunks and home runs. But someone has to play on special teams. Someone has to tend to the 1,200-pound mascot when stuff starts flying. Someone has to make sure the heavy hitters have a clean dugout.

KNOW IT ALL

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The Celtics narrowly avoided being upended by the Cavs ... but can they handle the Pistons?

Send your editorial comments to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings at irawlings@sportingnews.com.

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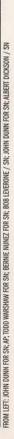
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TO KNOW LIST

5 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week







Maybe now we can stop talking about the past.

Major league baseball players will vote this week to strengthen their sport's policy on drug testing. The vote will come without much fanfare, just as a vote by owners on the issue last week barely crept into even the smallest headlines. But it will give baseball the strongest policy among the pro sports leagues and will launch an aggressive plan, in conjunction with the NFL, to develop a reliable test for human growth hormone. "Nobody wants that quicker than I do, I can assure you of that," commissioner Bud Selig told reporters last week.

Many people snickered when Selig asked former Sen. George Mitchell to investigate steroids use in baseball two years ago. More people sneered when Mitchell made his report public last December, calling it a "boondoggle" or worse. Mitchell's work was flawed, to be sure, but without it, the changes about to be enacted could never have happened. The report offered a baseline assessment of where the sport stood, a snapshot neither owners nor players could ignore.

The recommendations Mitchell made now will be put into effect, the most important of which is to conduct unannounced, year-round testing on major and minor league players that will be handled by an independent administrator. None of the players named in the Mitchell Report will face suspensions or fines, though active players may be required to perform community service. (For a look at how those players are faring this season, see page 50.) Some general managers and other team personnel might have to do the same—by talking to young athletes about the dangers of taking steroids.

No one is naive enough to think baseball can eradicate drug use by players. No sport can, just as no other industry can promise its employees will stay drug-free. But the new policy does give baseball the tools, as well as the bully pulpit, to shape its culture.

—John Rawlings

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: RICH SCHULTZ / AP, ELISE AMENDOLA / AP, EVAN AGOSTIVI / AP, CINCINNATI REDS

TELEVISION

Live from Bristol ...

Get ready for a lot more SportsCenter. ESPN announced last week that it is switching to a live nine-hour block of SportsCenter episodes beginning August 11, a change from the repeat format it has employed since 1996. The shows will air from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., and the morning installments will be hosted by broadcasting veteran Hannah Storm, who was an NBC Sports mainstay for a decade before joining The Early Show on CBS in 2002. The network won't have to worry about running out of material, at least not at first-the launch of the live episodes is timed to coincide with the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. -Tricia Garner



NUMBER THAT COUNTS

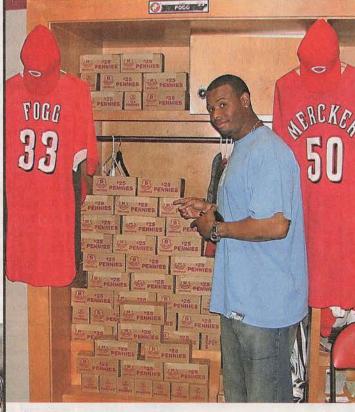
Justine Henin's world ranking ... and the number of players who have ended their careers while atop the WTA rankings, once the 25-year-old tennis player retired-effective immediately-last week. Apparently, going out on top was the trend of the week: Annika Sorenstam, ranked second in the LPGA. also announced her retirement plans, effective at the end of the season.



Henin abruptly walked away from her sport ...



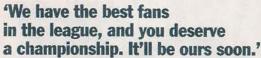
... but Sorenstam still has a few months before she says goodbye.



A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS Or how about 150,000 of them? Ken Griffey owed his Reds teammate Josh Fogg \$1,500 and, proving he is a man of his word, paid him back ... in pennies. Fogg showed up at his locker last week to find 60 boxes of pennies stacked inside, \$25 to a box. "Just think, each box weighs 16 pounds, so the man has 60 bowling balls

in his locker," Griffey told the Dayton Daily News. Countered Fogg: "I'm going to take them out to the bullpen and count them. I have a lot of time on my hands out there."

IT BEARS REPEATING



-Jazz point guard Deron Williams on his Twitter feed (twitter.com/deronwilliams), a day after his team was eliminated from the playoffs. Williams is one of the first pro athletes to embrace Twitter, a sort of "miniblog" written on the go.

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All times Eastern



Fans just might be celebrating Patrick's Day at the Indy 500 this year.

SUN 25

Indianapolis 500 (1 p.m., ABC). It's the 92nd running of the open-wheel classic. The Brickyard will be buzzing with anticipation. Can Danica Patrick win the big one? Can Scott Dixon win from the pole? Will Dario Franchitti repeat? Quick answers: Maybe. Possibly. No (he's in NASCAR this year).

Angels at White Sox (8 p.m., ESPN). It's the battle of the dirty-helmet boys as Vlad Guerrero and Orlando Cabrera challenge each other to a pregame pine tar rubbing contest.

SAT 24 NBA conference finals (8:30 p.m., ABC). New marketing campaign suggestion: Where home court happens. Or Where road-trip

woes happen. Or Where winning home-court advantage in the regular season really does matter happens.

TUE 27 Remember back in the day when a young Michael Chang made a name for himself by sweeping through the French Open? Keep your eyes peeled during the hours and hours of early-round coverage (noon, ESPN2) and you might just spot the next M.C.

Dodgers at Cubs (7 p.m., ESPN). Talk about your classic managerial showdowns. On one side, you have the stoic, steady hand that guided the Yankees to a bunch of wins and four World Series titles. On the other, you've got one of the fieriest, orneriest pinstripers of all time. Just doesn't seem right that they're facing off in the N.L., does it?

THU 29 It doesn't have the mystique of Rosenblatt Stadium in Omaha, but the competition at the Women's College World Series in Oklahoma City is no less intense. Games start at 1 p.m. on ESPN and run pretty much all day. - Ryan Fagan

B HILLE'

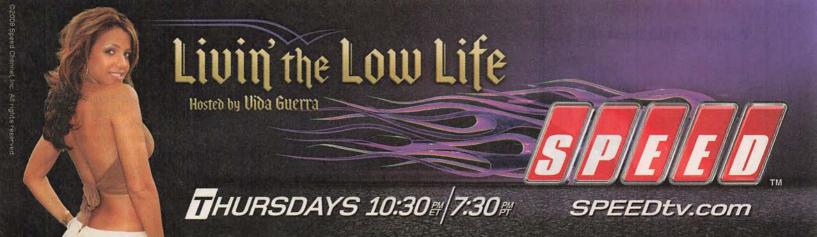
The NBA playoffs. It is the most exciting time of the year, and Hal in accounting is missing it. I asked him about Pau Gasol, and he said "Flex fuels are an unsustainable technology."

The Rays and Marlins. They were in first place at the same time, which is the weirdest news out of Florida since FSU extended Bobby Bowden's contract.

USC. First Reggie Bush, now O.J. Mayo. I'm just hoping this doesn't trickle down into a full-blown subprime recruit crisis.

Barry Bonds. Prosecutors chopped up old charges and stretched them with "Indictment Helper," but-stop me if you heard this about him before-his defense is a real concern.

Stormy weather. It's been unseasonably wet here. Case in point: The local NFL team is considering a trade for Cedric Benson so, in case of floods, he can skipper the evacuation party barge.

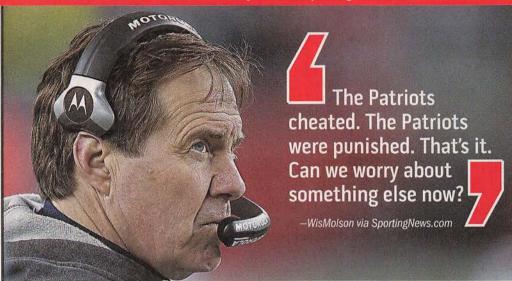


YOUR TURN

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.



Bill Belichick haters will just have to learn to be satisfied with the Patriots' Super Bowl flop.

- Mike Cameron is chastised because he "committed a sin of stupidity" with supplements, while Antonio Cromartie's story of being a father of "five children 3 years old and younger ... who live with their mothers in Texas, Georgia and Florida" is glossed over and he is praised for what he has gone through (SN, May 12). Something is seriously wrong if supplement use is worse than multiple out-of-wedlock kids. —atcllc via e-mail
- Antonio Cromartie certainly has overcome a lot to get where he is, but I find it disappointing that he seemingly is repeating history in his own family's life. Five children under the age of 3?! Sounds very similar to his own childhood. —Stu McCallister via e-mail
- "Until they bring rings to Salt Lake City, Deron Williams and Carlos Boozer never will rate with John Stockton and Karl Malone" (SN, May 12). Why not? Stockton and Malone never won a ring, either. —Scott Iverson via e-mail
- DEI is a victim of its own stupidity (SN, May 12). It never gave Dale Earnhardt Jr. good equipment and hosed him during negotiations. If Martin Truex leaves and Mark Martin retires, this organization will die. —MgoBlueScott via SportingNews.com
- First Annika Sorenstam and now Justine Henin? I guess they see more in life after sports. They will be missed as two of the greatest female athletes ever. —H22A via SportingNews.com

RE: FAST BREAK TO DISASTER?

Posted by SprungOnSports By hiring former Suns head coach Mike D'Antoni, the Knicks have practically abandoned the defensive approach that has been the tried-and-true method for success in the NBA over the past half-decade. Sure, the Suns made the playoffs and even reached the Western Conference finals, but that was with overly superior personnel. If you haven't noticed, teams that feature Steve Nash, Amare Stoudemire, Shawn Marion and a plethora of dynamic bench options don't grow on trees. With the Knicks' almost unsalvageable salary cap (at least for the foreseeable future), it'll take a Herculean effort from new team president Donnie Walsh to bring together a team half as good as those Suns teams were.

RE: NEVER STOOD A CHANCE Posted by expert40

I knew when Joey Harrington came out he was going to be a bust, the same way I knew that Akili Smith, David Carr and Kyle Boller were going to be busts. They never stood a chance in the NFL because of something they all share: They're Jeff Tedford quarterbacks. They don't read the whole field-they read half the field. They don't read defensesthe coaches do it for them. They all hold on to the ball too long, and their mechanics tend to be sloppy. In fact, possibly the only college coach who makes worse QBs for the NFL is Steve Spurrier.

POLLING PLACE

Which Florida team will finish with a better record?

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> 42% Marlins 58% Rays



SPORTING NEWS STAFF

54% Marlins **46%** Rays



RADIO★**STAR**

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'Thankfully, this ridiculous Spygate scandal is finally over. I will be so happy to never have to hear that term again. This story should never have been made as big as it was.'

-Eric in Florida on The Postgame with Peter Brown

FROM LEFT: JAY DROWNS / SN; NICK WASS / AP, BRIAN KERSEY / UPI PHOTO / LANDOV

2008 NHL AWARDS

PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Alexander >>> Ovechkin

LW, Capitals

Alexander the Great, indeed. All Ovechkin did was score 65 goals, the most by an NHL player since 1996, win the Art Ross Trophy with 112 points and lead a charge by the Capitals from last place to a Southeast Division title. It was enough to impress his peers, who gave Ovechkin, 22, 250 of a possible 287 votes for the league's highest player honor. Penguins center Evgeni Malkin finished second with 18 votes.

COACH OF THE YEAR

Mike Babcock

Red Wings

It looked so easy when Babcock's Wings bolted to a 41-10-4 record and appeared ready to challenge for a spot among the best single-season point totals in NHL history. But injuries ravaged the defense, a goalie controversy arose and the

team went into a 1-8-2 February funk. Babcock stayed positive, righted the ship and picked up six of the 18 votes cast by his fellow coaches, one more than Canadiens coach Guy Carbonneau.



ROOKIE OF THE YEAR Patrick Kane

RW, Blackhawks

Kane, 19, is one of two reasons the Blackhawks improved to 40-34-8 (Chicago was 31-42-9 last season) and missed the playoffs by only three points; rookie center Jonathan Toews is the other. Kane, who piled up 72 points (21 goals, 51 assists) and edged Capitals center Nicklas Backstrom (69 points) for rookie scoring honors, received 110 of 287 votes to edge Backstrom (74) and Toews (69) as the top rookie.

EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR Bob Gainey

Executive VP-general manager, Canadiens

Gainey maintained his faith in veteran right winger Alexei Kovalev, resisted the free-agent urge and refused to trade the talented core of young players he calls "our assets." His loyalty and unwavering belief in his team's draft picks and farm system paid huge dividends when the youthful Canadiens won their first division title in 16 years and posted an Eastern Conference-best 104 points. Gainey received 12 of the 28 votes cast by fellow executives.

SN's All-Star team

C Evgeni Malkin Penguins LW Alexander Ovechkin Capitals RW Jarome Iginla Flames

Nicklas Lidstrom Red Wings Mike Green Capitals Martin Brodeur Devils

Winners were determined by a vote of their peers, and all voting was conducted before the playoffs. Individuals could not vote for themselves, and players could not vote for teammates.





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NBA PLAYOFFS

COLLISION COURSE

The Pistons and Celtics took different roads to get here, but now they're exactly where we want them—going head to head, with a trip to The Finals on the line By Stan McNeal

hen the Eastern Conference last played a championship series without the Pistons:
Chauncey Billups was playing for the Timberwolves and hadn't yet become known as Mr. Big Shot.

Larry Brown had yet to coach the Pistons and was years away from three other jobs, too.

Pistons rookie Rodney Stuckey was a 10th-grader in Kent, Wash., yet to be discovered out of Eastern Washington.

LeBron James was a high school junior, a year away from owning his first Hummer.

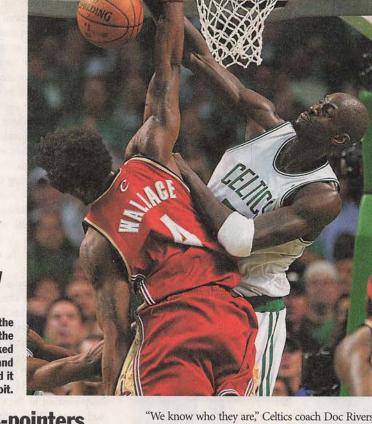
Kevin Garnett was a great player lacking a go-to move ... oh wait, that's still the case.

But you get the idea. The Pistons have been regular players in late May for quite some time. Since the 2002-03 season, in fact. Detroit's run of six consecutive conference finals is the league's second-longest since the playoffs expanded to four rounds in 1975. Their streak is surpassed only by the Lakers' eight straight trips in the 1980s.

"Phenomenal," says Magic coach Stan Van Gundy, whose team was ousted by the Pistons in five games in the conference semifinals. "It's hard for me to even fathom six straight trips to the conference finals."

Just about as unfathomable: It has been 20 years since the Pistons and Celtics last hooked up in the conference finals. Joe Dumars and Danny Ainge were rival guards for the Pistons and Celtics then, not their teams' front office bosses. The Pistons won that series in six games and earned their first spot in The Finals since the franchise relocated from Fort Wayne, Ind., in 1957. In this series, the Celtics are hoping to end their franchise-record Finals drought at 21 years, and the Pistons are gunning for their first trip in three years.

Garnett and the Celtics have the league's top-ranked defense—and they'll need it against Detroit.



Playoff 3-pointers

Credit Hornets coach Byron Scott for not whining about Robert Horry's hard screen on David West in Game 6. He must be aware that his point guard, Chris Paul, is known for throwing an elbow, holding a jersey or slipping in a discreet blow every so often.

Don't say defense is played only in the East. The Lakers went into the conference finals holding opponents to 43.7 percent shooting—and they didn't ignore their offense to do so. L.A. averaged 112.1 points in the first two rounds.

Warning to Cleveland: When LeBron James studies the numbers—and he always does—you can be sure he'll notice that his supporting cast scored only 47 points to his 45 in the biggest game of the season. And if somehow he forgets, everyone in New York will be quick to remind him.

"We know who they are," Celtics coach Doc Rivers says. "Before the year, people thought it would be us and Detroit in the Eastern Conference finals. We believed that, too."

It almost didn't happen. Held winless on the road in their first six playoff games, the Celtics have needed every bit of the home-court advantage they earned with their league-best 66-16 regular-season record. After the No. 8 seed Hawks took the Celtics to seven games in the first round, Boston needed another seven games to outlast LeBron James and (not much) Co. in Round 2. The Celtics won the finale—at home, of course—behind 41 points by Paul Pierce, the only holdover from the Boston team that went to the conference finals six years ago.

The Celtics reached this point thanks to an offseason overhaul orchestrated by Ainge that netted Garnett, Ray Allen and James Posey. Dumars' recipe for success has included equal parts stability and balance, ingredients that loom large in the conference finals. The Pistons don't have any of the game's top 10 players—but with Billups, Richard Hamilton, Tayshaun Prince and Rasheed Wallace, they have as many as four of the top 50.

"He made a decision when he first took over that he was going to build this team on pieces, not one super-star," Pistons coach Flip Saunders says. "It's paid off. He had a great vision."

Dumars' starting five has been together for the past four seasons. That kind of familiarity pays off most in

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the playoffs, especially in road games, when visiting teams have been known to crumble in crunch time.

"Detroit is a very settled team," says Grizzlies general manager Chris Wallace, who spent the previous 10 seasons in the Celtics' front office. "They may lose, but they won't beat themselves."

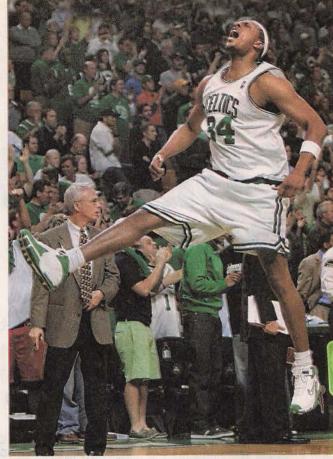
A key difference in this year's Pistons team over last year's has been the development of power forward Jason Maxiell and the emergence of Stuckey, who started when Billups was sidelined with a sore hamstring during the conference semifinals. "Dumars deserves a lot of credit," Wallace says. "Their bench, especially the young guys, has given them a dynamic they may have been lacking in the past couple of years."

Though the Pistons have been known to let down when times are good-even Saunders admits they play better when "we have a chip on our shoulders"-they play with equal confidence on the road and at home. Their 3-2 playoff record away from The Palace stands in sharp contrast to the Celtics' 0-6 road mark. The entire second round was dominated by home teams-visitors had lost 22 of 24 games before the Spurs visited the Hornets for Game 7-and no team struggled more as visitors than the Celtics. At home, they outscored opponents by an average of 16.5 points through the first two rounds. On the road, they were outscored by 9.5 per game. They averaged 95.8 points on 46.2 percent shooting on the parquet, compared with 85.8 on 41.9 percent as visitors.

The Celtics clicked from Day 1 of the preseason, but having only one holdover starter—Pierce—

bothered them when things got tight in the playoffs. With James getting over on Pierce on both ends of the floor until Game 7 and with the Cavaliers exposing Allen as a player on the decline (he was 4-for-24 on 3-pointers in the second round), the Celtics often didn't know where to turn.

Still, although he seldom has been the first option, Garnett has played big in the fourth quarter. He scored the go-ahead basket in the second-round opener with a short jump hook and has shot 57.1 percent from the field and 90.0 percent on free throws in the fourth quarter during the playoffs. Ben Wallace and Anderson



Pierce has been through his share of bad times in Boston—but thanks to his Game 7 heroics, now he gets to savor more of the good.

The Celtics reached this point thanks to an offseason overhaul that netted Kevin Garnett and Ray Allen. The Pistons' core players have been together for the past four seasons.

Varejao got physical with Garnett and tried to push him out of his comfort zone against Cleveland, but Rasheed Wallace has the length to bother Garnett's jump shot and the mobility to keep him from spinning in the lane against the Pistons. The Celtics, in fact, lack a clear edge at any position, making their top-ranked defense and home-court advantage even more important.

"Even though I think Detroit will win a game in Boston, I still like the Celtics because of home court," says an Eastern Conference advance scout. "They'll get one at Detroit to give them back

the home-court edge. And their defense is so good at home, the Pistons will have trouble scoring, just like Cleveland did."

If the Pistons fall to the Celtics, Dumars' well-known patience could be tested with regard to his coach. The focus on Saunders won't be so much on his reaching the conference finals as it will be on his 0-for-3 showing once there. Even if another coach goes—as Rick Carlisle and Brown have during this run—the roster is expected to stay intact.

A roster that, as the Pistons keep proving year after year, is strong enough to play into June. SN



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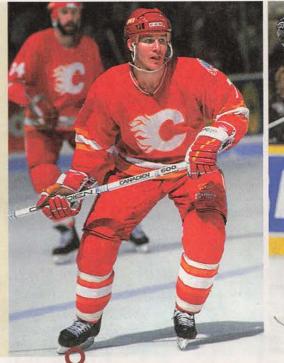
Half-full or half-empty?



abies have been baptized in it. Women have sat in it. Dogs have eaten out of it. And grown, unshaven men have cried while holding it. At 115 years old, the Stanley Cup has seen, heard, felt and tasted it all.

But for all of the players who have had their names inscribed on the Cup, an equal number have fallen just short in their quest for Lord Stanley's coveted mug. So what separates the winners from the losers? What makes the 34½-pound silver chalice so difficult to attain?

For answers, we sought out current and former players who have reached the finals.





MIKE KNUBLE

Now with the Flyers, he won a Stanley Cup with the Red Wings in 1998, his only finals appearance.

To me, a big factor is how healthy a team stays. You can absorb injuries in the first round or two, but in the finals you have to have everyone going. Sometimes you need someone to sneak up on everybody and have a good series.

But once the secret's out, everybody knows who's got the hot hand. What I remember most about our run is how it consumed the city. I'd put my trash out, and people would honk their horns going by.

In Detroit, everyone had those flags on their cars. By the second year, we almost got tired of it. There's that damn Cup again. (Laughing.) I'm kidding of course ... that's what you play for.

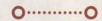


JOEY MULLEN ..

A Flyers assistant coach, he made four finals appearances as a player and won Cup titles with the Flames in 1989 and the Penguins in 1991 and 1992.

The first time I got there (with Calgary in 1986) was the time we lost. That's when I really found out what the Stanley Cup is all about. My first six or seven years, I never got a sniff at it. Once you get there and experience all the surroundings and commotion and atmosphere of how it builds from one round to the next, it makes you want to get back there again. When you win, the reality doesn't really set in until later.

The biggest difference between then and now is what was let go. You could get away with a lot more of everything. It was tough to get in front of that net. You'd get hacked and whacked—it was like a mugging sometimes. You'd have to stand in there and take the abuse if you wanted to score. Now you see more speed, and the passing is just incredible now.



GEORGES LARAQUE..

Now with the Penguins, he has reached the finals once—in 2006 with the Oilers, who lost to the Hurricanes.

The thing that hurts the most is that we lost Game 7. It's better not to make the playoffs at all, honestly. When you're a kid, you always say, "This is Game 7 of the finals" and you score the winning goal. You never lose. The Cup is in the building, and to be that close and not to win is the biggest shot to the heart. You can't even say, "Good job, guys." If somebody said that, he'd get slashed in the throat. What are the chances any of us would be back in that position again?

I still feel it. Some guys will carry it with them until their careers are over, unless they win it. FROM LEFT: JOHN GIAMUNDO / GETTY IMAGES; BRUCE BENNETT STUDIOS / GETTY IMAGES; MIKE BLAKE / LANDOV / RELITERS



A LEFT: ROBERT LABERGE / ALLSPORT, FRANK BRYAN / SN ARCHINES; DILIP VISHWANAT / SN ARCHIVES; FRED JEWE

That depends on whether you win the Stanley Cup or fall painfully short trying By Chuck Gormley











SERGEI GONCHAR

Also with Pittsburgh, he has one appearance—in 1998 with the Capitals, who were swept by the Red Wings.

When you're playing through the playoffs, it seems like the games keep going to another level. There's a higher tempo, a higher intensity. But when you get into the finals, it seems like there's even another level.

I was a young guy (24) at the time, and we played very well in the playoffs. But when the finals started, the Red Wings brought their game even higher and that surprised me.

This time of the year, your life is hockey. It's the only thing you have in your mind. It's what you work for all your life. There might be distractions around you, but you have to make sure nothing else is bothering you.

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BOB CLARKE

The Flyers' senior vice president, he made four finals appearances as a player with Philadelphia and won Cup championships in 1974 and 1975. He has had another four appearances, all losses, as a general manager—three with the Flyers and one with the North Stars.

If you get to the finals and don't win, there's no consolation. You might as well finish last. The owner's happy and everybody is happy to the extent the team did good, but as a player, you feel like crap. As a manager, I don't know if you feel any worse when you lose, but it's certainly a lot harder to sit and watch.

Once they get to the finals, I never talk to the team. If your coach is good enough to get you to the finals, he pretty much knows what to do. I think a manager can only screw things up by giving his advice.

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PAT VERBEEK

A Red Wings pro scout, he made one appearance as a player, a Cup victory with the Stars in 1999.

The big thing for us is that winning was a process. We finished second overall in 1997 and lost in the first round. The next year, we finished first overall and lost to Detroit in the conference finals. The year we won, we were down, 3-2, in the conference finals going into Colorado's building, and we were still confident. We had learned how to play when we were expected to win. Not many teams have gotten there and won without first learning how to get there.

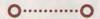
In the finals, there wasn't one guy in our lineup who wasn't banged up. My MCL was gone. I had gone 16 years without getting there; there was no way you were taking me out. The media never finds out our injuries, and neither does the other team. Guys might wear an ice bag on their left ankle to hide bruised ribs.

KEVIN STEVENS

A Penguins pro scout, he won the Cup in his only two appearances, with Pittsburgh in '91 and '92.

Guys like Mario Lemieux and Paul Coffey took some offensive chances in the regular season, but when it came down to playoff time, they were backchecking and killing penalties. And you need goals from your third line. I remember Randy Gilhen scoring a goal against Washington after he was sitting for like two hours.

No one remembers the teams that go to the finals and lose. I'm a huge sports fan, and I think it's the hardest thing to win, physically and mentally.







ALL-ACCESS DIRTY JOBS

ON THE MODES







In an effort to minimize scenes like these, Ralphie trainer Kevin Priola has to use a little ingenuity: 'Just before her gate opens, we count down from 10. She's so smart, she knows the count, and right around three, she'll bust out before we're ready-and that can lead to problems. So I've started counting in foreign languages. She picked up on Spanish quick, and now we're using Japanese. We'll have to eventually go on the silent count.'

Running with—and behind— Colorado's mammoth mascot is all about keeping up, holding on and having lots of fun despite loads and loads of ... By Matt Hayes / Photos by Jay Drowns

> lease, everyone, you don't know dirty. Here is Adam Gregory. A senior at the University of Colorado, he no more stands out on the gorgeous Boulder campus than chaps on a cowboy.

But Lord almighty, does he have a story to tell.

Gregory is a handler for CU's famous mascot, Ralphie. You know, the 1,200-pound buffalo that leads the football team onto the field before the start of each half. It is here where the story begins:

"We start running, and she starts pooping," Gregory says. "And I'm behind her, just trying to hold on and keep up. And it's flying everywhere—all over my face, my clothes, everything. So I'm thinking, I could let go and end it. But if I let go, it's more humiliating. The object is to hold on and keep up. You let go, you've failed."

Yeah, this is serious work—but also serious fun.

Not just anyone can be a Ralphie Handler. Not just anyone can hold on for a 40-second adrenaline ride of a lifetime. Not just anyone can shovel it and run like it—all in the same day.

It starts with 6 a.m. workouts with a CU athletic trainer specifically assigned to the team. Bench press, squats, sprints—the works. If you're a minute late, you're running the stadium steps after workouts and then laboring through 50 up-downs.

"Chopping your feet the whole way," says Annie Lawson, the lone woman on the roster of 10. "Chop, chop, chop, chop."

The roster is gleaned from open tryouts, which, of course, are where the fun begins. The typical annual tryout goes something like this:

- 1. Joe Six-pack arrives and says he wants to run with Ralphie.
- 2. Handlers director Kevin Priola says it's not what it seems
 - 3. Joe Six-pack works out and then wakes up-and goes

'We start running, and she starts pooping.

And I'm behind her, just trying to hold on and keep up.
And it's flying everywhere—all over my face, my clothes, everything.'

-Handler Adam Gregory



'I don't know if you can compare controlling a 1,200-pound animal to football. You only have to control a 300-pound lineman for a few seconds.' —Handler turned defensive lineman Tyler Sale

back to playing fraternity flag football.

"It's not for everyone," Priola says. "It's not what it seems."

Far from it. Consider this concept: Jump on a treadmill and turn it up to 10 mph. No matter who or how old you are, that's a full-blown sprint. Now imagine it at 20 mph—in front of a

packed stadium while an enormous beast is pulling you every way but straight. While you run in jeans.

"Those guys," says CU coach Dan Hawkins, "work their tails off."

Still not a believer? Let us introduce Tyler Sale. For the past year, he held down the loop position, or the toughest spot on the run. There are two handlers forward, two back and one holding the loop on the back of Ralphie and—futile as it seems—trying to control the beast and its speed.

This spring, Sale decided to give football a try and walked on the team. He's 6-3, 255 pounds and Hawkins says he has a "good chance" to con-





Shoveling it isn't the only issue. The big girl can be temperamental, which can lead to a kick, a sideswipe or a head butt. Buffaloes have horns for a reason, you know.

tribute on the defensive line this fall.

Very little has changed since Sale left the Handlers: He still has to maintain a minimum gradepoint average, still has to sign an honor code, still can't miss workouts. The only thing different is the actual work.

"I don't know if you can compare controlling a 1,200-pound animal to football," Sale says. "You only have to control a 300-pound lineman for a few seconds."

The Ralphie Experience, meanwhile, lasts much, much longer. Down 120 yards, across the field another 53 yards, and back down another 120 and into the waiting pen. It's about 40 seconds—but seems like an eternity when you can't

feel your feet touch the ground.

And although the glory is in game day, the reality is in the details. Ralphie needs exercise, needs to be groomed. Practice runs are often more difficult—more dangerous—than the real deal: broken ribs, collarbones and ankles.

And the grooming? Here's a visual: the big girl in her trailer, being pulled by a truck for 20

hours on a 2006 trip to Athens, Ga., and moving around with each bump and turn, incline and decline, in the road. Let's just say the local car wash comes in handy.

"Someone has to get in that trailer and clean," says Handler Chip Samson.

"It's usually low man on the totem pole."

Says Lawson, who just finished her freshman season: "Being low man is not the best position to be in."

Then again, it could be worse. It could be flying everywhere on game day.

"I didn't really care," Gregory says. "Being on this team is what it's all about."

There's nothing humiliating about that. SN



BEHIND THE SCENES AT FENWAY PARK

BABY, YOU CAN park my car

Before the Red Sox take the field, Paul Anderson plays his own game at Fenway—a game of inches.

Ask Anderson, the Sox's team parking lot attendant, to describe his job and he puts it this way:

"It's a million-dollar game of Tetris."

In Anderson's eight seasons

as valet to the Sox, there are a few standout stats:

Most expensive car: David Ortiz's \$300,000 Mercedes-Benz SL65.

Least expensive car: Shea Hillenbrand's Honda Accord (Hillenbrand started his career in Boston).

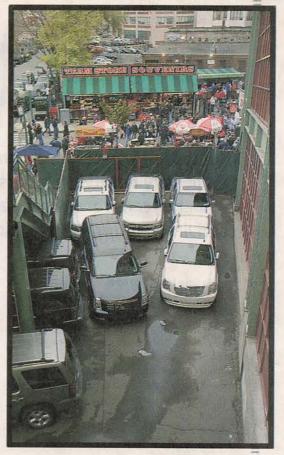
Any accidents? They have been few and far between,

but, Anderson says, "We're covered."

Last guys out of the ballpark after a game: Coco Crisp and Hideki Okajima.

First guys out of the ballpark after a game: Manny Ramirez and J.D. Drew.

Best tip: A 2004 World Series championship ring. —Albert Dickson





IN THE STANDS WITH A WRIGLEY BEER MAN

FUN? HECK, THIS IS a lot of work

In 1983, while attending Columbia College in Chicago, Bob Shaw was told by a friend about a summer job he had gotten as a beer vendor at Wrigley Field. Shaw thought he'd try it for a summer but liked it so much that, even while working in radio, he made a career of selling beer at both Wrigley and Comiskey Park. He's dedicated to his craft—Shaw even works the Cubs' spring training games in Arizona. There's no shortage of sun-splashed days and warm summer nights, but Shaw says there are things most people don't know that make vending beer a tough and dirty job.

It's competitive. You don't get a section assigned to you; you are assigned to a commissary. That's where you reload. Once you are loaded, you go out and sell wherever you can. It's like NASCAR, where everyone is sort of bumping each other, jockeying for position. Some vendors get really into keeping track of their sales. There is a board at the White Sox with the top 10 in sales. Some guys take that very seriously. It's a sickness.

It's physical. I spend the whole offseason running and lifting weights because if you are going to do this every day, you are going to get sore. Everyone asks me if my back hurts. Well, yeah, but it's my back, my feet, my ankles, my head. Everything hurts.

You don't get to watch baseball. My first year was '83, and the Sox went to the playoffs. The next year, the Cubs went to the playoffs. I thought, 'This is going to be great.' But you don't go to the playoffs every year. After a while, you don't watch the games at all. You have rent to pay.

Benefits? What benefits? There is a union, the service employees' union. But there's no health care or anything. I bought my own. You have to set up your own retirement plan, too.

Life is dictated by the Pope and rain delays. Rain delays are the worst because you might be there all night. And people ask you when the game's going to start. I say, 'Probably when it stops raining.' The way the schedule is this year is wacky because the Yankees had to go on the road so much for the Pope's visit. That affected all the schedules. That's tough on the players, but it's tough on the vendors, too. —Sean Deveney

ON THE ICE WITH AN NHL ENFORCER

WALK the line

Covotes left winger Daniel Carcillo—5-11, 203 pounds with a crazy-high 324 penalty minutes in his first full season—is learning the hard way that competitiveness and chaos can be tough to tell apart. His 10 tips for surviving and thriving as a middleweight fighter. As told to Steve Greenberg

You have to want to do it. >>> Unless you're 6-8, 250 pounds, you should never let a coach force you to fight. I'm a pretty mellow guy off the ice; a lot of people who get to know me say I'm totally different than the guy they see at the arena. But I'll tell you something my coach, Wayne Gretzky, and my teammates already know: I like to fight. It's not about size; it's about your willingness to do it. There are a lot of big guys out there who don't like fighting. Do I enjoy fighting a big guy who doesn't like to fight? Damn right I do.

Sometimes, though, discretion really is the better part of valor. >>> I fought Raitis Ivanans in L.A. even though I really didn't want to. I'd scored a nice goal and was kind of revved up and skating around being an idiot. Wayne told me, "If he comes out, I want you to come right off the ice." Sure enough, on my last shift, Ivanans came out looking for me. He's a pretty scary guy: 6-3, 263 and incredibly strong. But I didn't listen to Wayne because I thought it would be cowardly to back down. We traded punches, he hit me on the forehead and I went down. It was quick, but it was one of the worst beatings I've taken in hockey.

Teven a bleeder has to have thick skin. >>> I know hockey fights supposedly are about showing up—not who wins and who loses—but when you get beat up, it's pretty tough to swallow. It's embarrassing, especially when it happens in front of 18,000 people and the 40 guys on both benches. Bouncing back is the biggest thing. It's like being a closer in baseball.

Make the guys who really deserve it pay when you have the chance. >>> I had a lot of fun beating up Vancouver's Alex Burrows this season in Phoenix. He's just a little rat; he goes around starting trouble but doesn't back up what he does on the ice with his fists too often. So when he decided to drop the gloves with me, it was good. I grabbed him at center ice and he didn't have anywhere to go. It was kind of like a caveman beating; he was on his knees and I was whaling

__Just throw 'em. >>> Everybody fights dif-Ferently—and most of it is instinct anyway but the best middleweights try to grab the center of the other guy's jersey and just throw and throw. Hitting them anywhere in the face is good, but the chin area is where if you connect with a good shot, they go good night.

But work the body, too. >>> I mean your Own body. Summers are tough; everyone assumes we just play golf, but that's nuts. I took three weeks off after the season ended and then I was back in the gym training, with special focus on my legs and my core. I work out in Toronto, where I'm from, with guys like Rick Nash (Blue Jackets) and Patrick O'Sullivan (Kings). We don't mess around. We get after it.





Don't leave all the ice at the **rink.** >>> I live by myself, so I have to take care of myself when I get home after a rough fight. My method of treatment pretty much consists of ice and maybe a Tylenol PM. The good thing is the ice is usually on my hand, not my head. I didn't lose too many fights this season. I had 19. I'd say I won probably 15 of them. I lost only

two of them for sure, to Ivanans and to Nashville's Darcy Hordichuk.

Your best fights will wind up on YouTube ... Oyou know, if you're into that sort of thing. >>>People have been posting video of my fights for as long as I've been playing pro hockey. Yeah, sometimes I check it out. I didn't mind going on there and watching my fight from this season with Dallas' Krys Barch. He came at me, I onepunched him and he was out cold. Of course, my fights with Ivanans and Hordichuk are on there, too, so it isn't all good.

Even if you're a middleweight, remember: You wouldn't be in the league if you couldn't play the game. >>> I had a discussion

Dirty work?

Yeah, it's dirty work. But one thing I know for sure is that my teammates appreciate the hell out of me fighting.'

with Wayne and Shane Doan, our captain, toward the end of the season. They reminded me that I can be a guy who gets under other players' skin but that I also have a lot of skill. For a true tough guy, that's pretty rare, but most smaller guys who like to fight also can skate and handle the puck. I had only 13 goals overall, but I scored five in the last two games. Wayne and

Shane both think I can be a 30-goal scorer, and I'd love to prove them right.

For fighters of all sizes: Learn where competitiveness ends and chaos begins. >>> I didn't set out to have 324 penalty minutes.

There were too many major penalties and game misconducts in there. I crossed that fine line too often, and I guess I'm still learning where it is. In Nashville, I lost the fight to Hordichuk-my first loss all year-and I got really pissed off and pretty much just lost it. I pushed a linesman, got a 10-minute misconduct and a game misconduct. Wayne got ticked off at me and sent me down to the minors for a week. You talk about a wakeup call. Why would anyone want to mess with his own career like that? -As told to Steve Greenberg

Which job is dirtiest? ■ SPORTINGNEWS.COM MEMBERS **■ SPORTING NEWS STAFF NHL** enforcer Wedge buster 25% 18% Major league catcher 18% College basketball walk-on 5% 18% **NBA** defensive specialist 2%

Scott Kneller, personal trainer

"Marlin Jackson is an absolute professional. He shows up and does everything you ask of him and more," says Kneller, 26. For Jackson, that requires buying into API's philosophy of "prehabilitation"—gearing up the body to avoid the incidence of injuries that may or may not be related to, for example, the shoulder or the foot he dinged in the past. Any athlete who comes to API injured or healthy goes through a full body evaluation to identify what the company calls "limiting factors" in performance.

Luke Richesson, performance coach

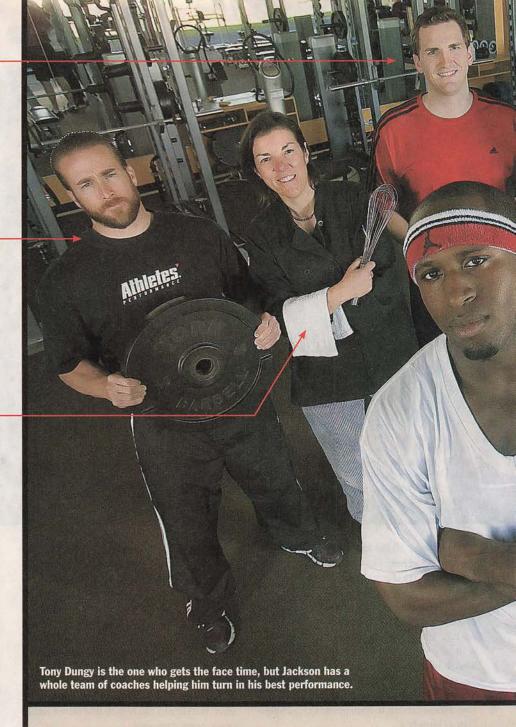
SPORTING NEWS first met this former Kansas Jayhawks special teams standout when he was training Jake Long, Matt Ryan, Vernon Gholston and others for the NFL Scouting Combine. He worked with Jackson this spring on his strength, flexibility and balance, with a focus—as always, for Richesson—on the weights. "The weight room is an area where not only will you gain your horsepower, but mentally it'll make you one tough SOB," says Richesson, 34. "You'll stay in the fight through the game."

Debbie Martell, chef

If an athlete is used to fast food, Martell, 49, feeds him turkey burgers ("cuts the fat down 85 percent but still delivers the taste," she says) or chicken fingers coated in honey and mustard, rolled in cereal and baked. For athletes from the South, she cooks with cornstarch instead of flour and butter. For guys like Jackson and Jared Allen, who are very in tune with their bodies, the emphasis on workout days is on nutrient-dense foods and low-carb energy drinks ("so you can do stupid things faster," she jokes).



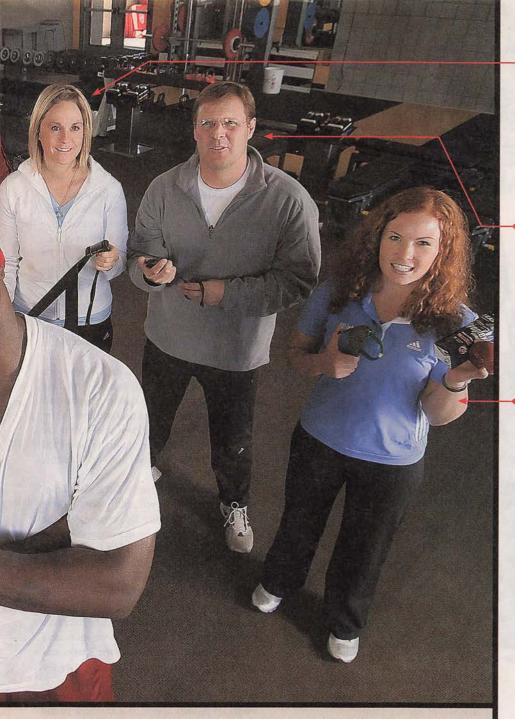
Robbins (above right) uses the VO₂ Max test to measure Jackson's aerobic recovery—which is a lot easier than getting him to drop 20 pounds.



SWEATING IT OUT WITH THE NFL'S OFFSEASON COACHES

THE DOODY SHOP

NFL players spend the fall getting dented and banged up. In the offseason, the Athletes' Performance Institute gets them running like new again. By Steve Greenberg



Andria Hassler, soft-tissue therapist

When the former USGF Level 7 gymnast digs in for some subscapular or rotator cuff work, she doesn't mess around. "Fortunately," Jackson says during our visit, "I'm here on my regeneration day, so this shouldn't hurt too bad." Hassler, 31, calls Jackson "a great person and a great guy to work with; he's very much about what's going on with his body. That's what sets athletes apart from regular people: They're really aware of what's going on with their bodies."

Paul Robbins, metabolic specialist

Robbins, 45, is a master at getting overweight players to shed pounds, but for someone as fit as Jackson, the job is to improve his rate of aerobic recovery. In a VO₂ max test—measuring Jackson's oxygen intake and heart rate against incrementally increased speed and resistance on a treadmill—Jackson's heart rate rises as high as 175, then drops 60 beats within 2 minutes as he slows down. "Right now, could he do the fourth quarter at his peak? No," Robbins says. "But he's in great shape for this time of year."

Sarah Snyder, performance nutritionist

The 6-0 Jackson weighs in at 199 before his consultation with Snyder. He wants to maintain his weight but decrease body fat. "Marlin is right with the program," says Snyder, a 25-year-old former collegiate lacrosse player and competitive swimmer. She has prescribed about 3,000 calories a day for Jackson—1,000 more than what's recommended for the average adult. "He is very interested in nutrition." In general, Snyder prefers working with NFL players over NBA players because "they're used to a structured, organizational setting. And they're a little more well-mannered."

When Jackson and Bengals tackle Levi Jones (above left) make big plays next year, they can thank Richesson (above right) and Hassler for the hard work they put into their offseason.



Who does that guy think he is? Perhaps you've wondered that before about an NFL player who blew town after the season, took a pass on informal team workouts over the next several months and didn't resurface until just in time for minicamp. But there's at least a decent chance he was working as hard as anybody, and maybe harder.

We found four such players—Colts cornerback Marlin Jackson, then-Chiefs defensive end Jared Allen, Cardinals safety Adrian Wilson and Ravens linebacker Terrell Suggs —plus other pro athletes on a late-March day at the Athletes' Performance Institute in Tempe, Ariz. We followed Jackson as a veritable coaching staff (sans any semblance of the glory and riches bestowed upon actual NFL coaches) of trainers and body shapers worked on getting him readier than ever for another NFL season.

"I had to talk to (Colts G.M.) Bill Polian and coach (Tony) Dungy, but they trust me to work hard," Jackson said as he lay on a massage table getting his quads stretched by a soft-tissue therapist. "I like the environment here—the people first and then the workout. Oh, and the weather. I mean, you've got palm trees out here."



Graves threw his life in a trailer and moved across the country—to haul around tires.

ny job that requires using a blowtorch while watching cars race at nearly 200 mph has to be cool, right?

Well ...

Not so much. Being the tire man on a NASCAR team involves both, and unless you like being covered in brake dust, traveling every weekend and getting blamed for crashes that aren't your fault, it's probably not for you.

Forty-three people do it every week in NASCAR's Sprint Cup Series. Dan Graves is one of them. Graves was racing on local tracks in California when he decided to make a career in the business. "I knew North Carolina was the racing capital of the world, so I threw all my stuff in a trailer," he says. "I didn't know anybody there. I stayed at a weekly hotel."

He worked for Richard Childress Racing for seven years and had a short stint with Michael

Waltrip Racing before landing last year with Hendrick Motorsports. This season, he's working on Casey Mears' No. 5 team.

In addition to having the classic "moved there to chase a dream" story, Graves has a cool nickname, which is true of any crew member worth his wrenches. Everybody calls him Bookemthink Book 'em, Danno. If you don't get it, ask an old person.

"A lot of people at RCR, that's what they knew me as," he says. "Some of the people probably thought that was my real name. When I switched jobs, the nickname went with me."

Bookem does not make the tires, test the tires, design the tires or even put them on the car. He hauls them around and puts air in them. Yet he feels responsible if the tires don't work well. "When any drivers come on the radio and bring up tires, you have to take it a little personally," he

Putting air in the tires is not as simple as it sounds. Pressures are measured to a fraction of a pound, and the crew chief often calls for a change when the driver is already on pit lane-which means Graves has to get to the tires, make the change and be out of the way in a matter of sec-

At least he gets to use a cool gauge doohickey-not one of those cheap-o stick jobs you buy at the gas station. NASCAR teams use digital gauges that are calibrated every week and designed to be sensitive to altitude changes. They are not, contrary to public opinion, used to fill Jack Roush full of hot air.

Once the tires come off the car, Graves uses a blowtorch that peels off rubber to check how worn out the tires are. That information is used to decide how long a set of tires will last. If a tire blows, it's not because the crew chief left the car on the track too long or the driver drove too hard or Goodyear makes bad tires—it's Bookem's

The job not only is messy, but it also comes complete with undeserved guilt, impossibly long hours and lots of pressure. It's like moving all the furniture from your house to a house down the street and then to another house before giving up and taking it all back to the store.

First, Graves takes possession of 18 sets of tires from Goodyear and moves them to his area in the garage. Finding that spot is like finding your spot in an open campground; he marks his territory. There are disputes about spots, and tire guys defend their turf like the Sharks and Jets. Hours before the race, Graves moves the tires to the No. 5 team's pit stall. After the race, he returns them to Goodyear. Those puppies weigh 80 pounds apiece, and the bulk of the

> race season is in the heat of summer.

"One day I might wake up and find it's not for me," Graves says. "But that hasn't happened yet."

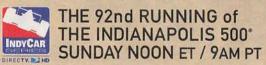
Bookem works in metal fabrication at the shop during the week. There's irony here. If a tire blows and the car

hits the wall, he gets blamed for the tire and then he has to fix the bent sheet metal-sometimes by beating it with a huge hammer. Now that's fun.

Tire man, tire changerwhat's the difference?

Two jobs on a NASCAR team have tire in the title. The tire changers-there are two of them-go over the wall during pit stops and change the tires. The tire man picks the tires up, moves them around, fills them with air and returns them.



















Graham Rahal

Dan Wheldon

Danica Patrick

Marco Andretti

Helio Castroneves

IN THE CHAIR WITH AN NHL DENTIST

HIS JOB OILES

Dr. Thomas Long—who was the assistant captain on the 1968 Dartmouth hockey team—has been the Carolina Hurricanes' dentist since the team moved to Raleigh before the 1997-98 season. He estimates he has missed five home games in that time, and—as he'll tell you-he has seen a lot.

Dental injuries aren't as prevalent as they used to be. When they happen, they're a mess. Most of the time, it's suturing faces. Every night, somebody is getting four or five stitches. There's a physician there, and I usually help him. I do the nose and below.

Back when I was playing, they didn't have glass at a lot of places. The game was played at board level and lower. Now, with the glass, the game is played higher up. Because of that, there's a lot of sticks in the face.

Every now and then someone gets hit in the mouth and two or three teeth fall out. One of the stories is Rod Brind'Amour picking up (another player's) teeth with his stick. They were scattered all over the ice. There were four or five teeth that were pretty beat up.

Sticks to the mouth, teeth on the ice, blood all over and no shifts missed ... it's all in a day's work for an NHL dentist.

If a tooth is totally knocked out, you put it

back in, bond it and hold it in place with some fishing wire. It all takes a couple of minutes. Then you send the guy back out there.

I've seen some guys with mouthguards, and when they took the mouthguards out, the teeth came with them. One of the worst ones I've seen was four years ago. It was a practice, the guy got a stick in the mouth. All four of his front teeth were knocked to the back of his throat. The mouthguard was split. If he didn't have a mouthguard, he probably would have had facial fractures.

We put one guy who got cut back together. We started at the end of the first period. We got him finally done by halfway through the third. I could see the carotid artery just bumping. It was unbelievable. It was like an anatomy specimen. Yeah, it's a dirty job. But I love it. -As told to Matt Crossman





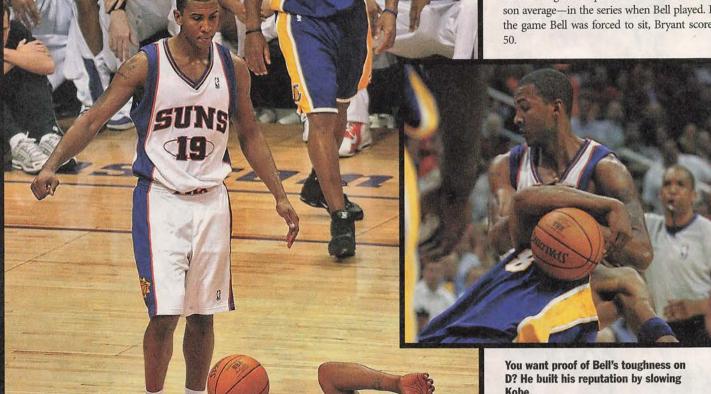
GAME PREP WITH AN NBA STOPPER

Defending IS HIS HONOR

He plays on a run-and-gun team, but Suns swingman Raia Bell can lock down a star with the best of them. His motto: Be prepared. By Stan McNeal

very title-worthy team has one-a guy who embraces the thankless role of defensive enforcer. You know the type. More interested in taking a charge than being the star. Typically described by teammates as always being "ready to battle" or "doing whatever it takes to win," which often is just opponent code for "Man, that guy plays dirty," these guvs would just as soon stick an elbow in your schnoz as make a jumper in the lane.

The Suns' Raja Bell uses more than elbows to do his job as a defensive stopper. Remember two years ago when he made like a clothesline and dropped Kobe Bryant in the playoffs? Bell's behavior earned him a suspension, and his tough talking-he called Bryant pompous and said, "I don't respect him"-earned him a reputation as a guy not to be messed with. His style worked. Kobe averaged 24.2 points-11.2 under his season average-in the series when Bell played. In the game Bell was forced to sit, Bryant scored



Bell has been regarded as one of the league's top defensive wing players since that series and made an all-defensive team the past two seasons (first-team in 2006-07 and second-team in 2007-08). With Bryant tearing up the playoffshe's averaging 5.0 points above his 28.3 regularseason average-any remaining team would love to have Bell on its roster.

Taking on the toughest defensive assignment requires Bell to bring a certain attitude to every game. But how does he generate such intensity? Does he sit in a dark room, staring at walls and

M TOP LEFT: JAY DROWNS / SN (3)

sharpening his elbows? Does he blast Guns N' Roses on his iPod? Does he go for a triple espresso with a Red Bull chaser?

Before the Suns' season ended in the first round (don't blame Bell—he held San Antonio's Manu Ginobili below his season average), Bell gave us a behind-the-scenes look at his game-day routine.

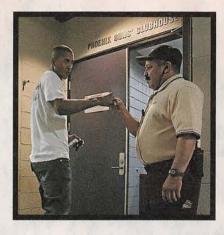
ell follows the same pregame ritual before every home game but also adds plenty of touches that best can be described as unique. Start with how he gets dressed. He arrives at U.S. Airways Arena at least 90 minutes before tipoff and changes into his uniform. Well, sort of. The first thing Bell does is take off his shirt and put on his game jersey. Then he finishes changing out of his civvies and into his game shorts, socks and shoes. Once he has his shoes on, he takes off his game jersey and puts on a warmup shirt.

"Maybe I forgot before I was going out to warm up one day, put on my jersey and didn't realize it," Bell says. "Knowing me, if I had a good game, I stuck with it. I can't even remember when it started."

The routine then takes a turn toward normal. Bell checks with a Suns staffer to make sure his game tickets will get to the right folks. He grabs a cup of coffee, some cream, a few sugars. Once changed, he visits the training room so the medical staff can "make sure my body's working." Unlike most players, he doesn't have his ankles taped, but he needs a sometimes-balky back worked on. Bell stays in the training room until the countdown clock to tipoff reads 60 minutes.

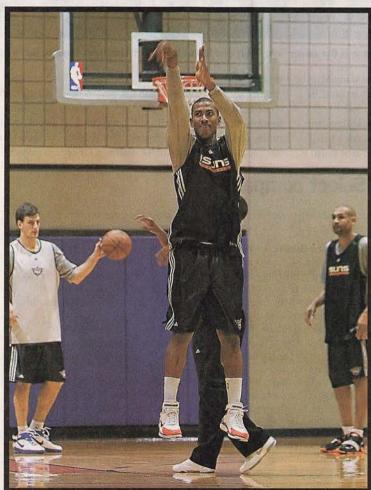
Time for early shooting and, yes, he's a little uptight about this as

well. Most players have an assistant coach they partner with to pass them the ball during these drills. Bell always hooks up with the same assistant. "I have to make 10 jump shots from five spots in 2-point range," he says. "Then I make



In his meticulous game-day routine, Bell carves out time for the essentials: lots of shots and lots of caffeine.





seven 3s from each corner, then five 3s off the move from three spots around the perimeter. If I don't make each set within a reasonable attempt, I'll start over. The goal is to find your groove, to start feeling confident with your shot."

To get comfortable with his shooting typically takes Bell about 20 minutes. All the practice has paid off. Since signing with the Suns as a free agent in 2005, Bell has become known almost as much for his 3-point shooting as for his defense. In the past three seasons, he is second in the league to Ray Allen in made 3-pointers and eighth in 3-point percentage.

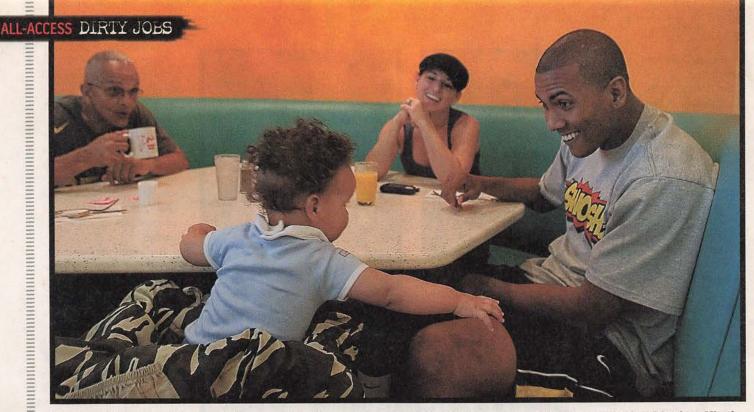
His pregame shooting completed, Bell returns to the locker room, typically with about 40 minutes left before tipoff. The Suns break into group meetings, with the big men gathering in a meeting room and the guards staying in the spacious locker room, which features a big-screen TV in the middle of two large greaseboards. On one are scouting tips for that night's game (Force Ginobili LEFT, says one). On the other is a running tally of individual hustle stats such as deflections.

Before Bell sprawls out to stretch during the guards' meeting, he puts ice in a cup and places it in his locker. "For the Red Bull I'll drink later," he says. "You never know. I might not have time to get the cup ready between meetings." After the 10-minute group meetings, the bigs join the guards in the locker room for final instructions from the head coach. While Mike D'Antoni delivers his pregame speech, Bell downs his Red Bull.

Then he's ready for the pregame layup line. The Suns gather in a circle outside their locker room for group hugs and high-fives. Point guard Steve Nash leads the charge through the tunnel onto the court, running past a gathering spot that has been cor-

doned off for high-end ticket holders. Right behind Nash is Bell, who makes a point of jumping up and "pretending to do some kind of crazy dunk" on the tunnel overhang.

When the countdown to tipoff reaches 6 min-



Before every home game, the scene is the same: Bell, Cindy and Dia at the OHOP. This time, though, Bell's father, Roger, is visiting from Miami.

utes, Bell is warmed and ready. Too warmed, in fact. "I have a lot of extra energy at that point," he says. To keep from burning out, he heads back to the locker room to chill out by himself. "It started once when I had to pee, then it became a habit," he says. "If I'm out there, I am going to be warm-

ing up hard and I've done enough at that point. I want to calm down for a bit. I'm still pretty good and warm and on my second wind when the game starts." Inside the locker room, he finds a quiet spot, grabs a water and slows his heartbeat. When you don't see him on the floor with his teammates for the national anthem, you know he's still chilling. He makes his way back to the court before the starting lineups are introduced.

he early part of game day lacks some of the idiosyncrasies of the pregame routine, but it's just as structured. Bell rises at 8 for a breakfast of oatmeal and yogurt, joined usually by his wife, Cindy, and 1-year-old son, Dia. He leaves his Paradise Valley home at 8:45 to arrive at the arena in plenty of time for 10 a.m.

shootaround.

After shootaround, Bell handles any media requests. Many players will talk to reporters after shootaround but then will not speak to the media again until after the game. Bell doesn't have such self-imposed rules. "There's a lot of

stars on this team," he says. "It's not like I'm sought after that often."

Before heading home, Bell visits the hot and cold tubs for treatment. He slips into the icy water up to his chest. After 3 minutes in the cold, he goes 2 in the hot. Three more cold, followed

by 2 more hot and then he ends with 3 minutes in the cold. "That's the best way to make sure any swelling is down," he says.

From the arena, he drives back home or meets his wife and son for lunch. They always dine at the same place—an Original House of Pancakes restaurant not far from home—at around the same time, 12:30. Bell does not always order the same meal. "I'm not that anal," he says. His order includes pancakes sometimes, or eggs and toast, juice but no coffee. "No caffeine yet," he says.

He spends the afternoon at home, going down for a 2-hour nap at 2. Cindy serves the same pregame meal—whole wheat pasta with marinara sauce, bread and water—shortly after 4. For the typical 7 p.m. start, Bell is on the road by 4:45 to be downtown 90 minutes before tipoff. Upon arrival at the arena, he exchanges the same pleasantries and fist-bumps with the same group of arena employees.

"I'm a creature of habit," he says.

Indeed—and some habits are a bit
odder than others.

SN

Select company

According to an advance scout, no one does perimeter D better than these guys:

Bruce Bowen, Spurs. What separates him are intelligence and effort. He says he doesn't watch a lot of video, but he's reading scouting reports or something because he does a great job of knowing where his guy is supposed to get the ball. Some consider him a dirty player because of how shooters sometimes land on his feet, but I don't agree. Bowen also has great versatility, able to guard anyone except centers.

Tayshaun Prince, Pistons. He might not be as good chasing guys around screens as Bowen is, but no one's better at sticking with his man once he has the ball. That's why he'll block more shots than these other guys.

Raja Bell, Suns. He will get right up on his man and still make it difficult for him to get around him. What makes him different from these other guys is he's tough and physical. For example, if Bowen gets tangled up with his man, he's likely to flop. Bell is more likely to mix in an elbow.

James Posey, Celtics. He always puts that extra effort into closing out on shooters. He's so long, and that helps him do a great job of contesting shots. When his man has the ball, Posey will try to keep a hand over it, not necessarily to reach in for it, but to make it more difficult for his man to go up for a shot.

5Kobe Bryant, Lakers/LeBron James, Cavaliers. These two could be the best, but they just don't always give the necessary effort. Of course, it's more important for them to score than to defend, but that's a difference between them and Michael Jordan. He was expected to score, too, but even during the regular season, he would flat-out lock guys down every night it was necessary. I don't see that same focus from these two.

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crackin THE KNUCKLEBA

The only thing harder than hitting the pitch is catching it By Sean Deveney

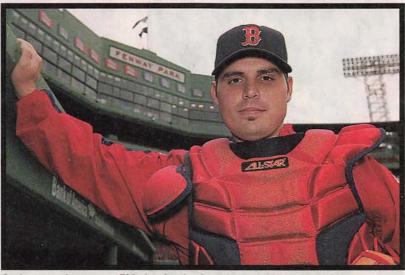
n a cool night hours before a game in late April, catcher Kevin Cash is in the Boston bullpen, his forehead moist from sweat. He's not playing this one, but it doesn't look much like a day off.

Cash is the personal catcher for Boston knuckleballer Tim Wakefield, which means he usually plays only when Wakefield pitches. But that doesn't mean Cash spends the interim four days counting dandelions and playing tiddlywinks.

No, if you're a knuckleballer's catcher, the off-days are harder than the days you play. Wakefield once was given a piece of advice: To throw the knuckleball, you have to live and breathe the knuckleball. Well, catching the knuckleball is a bit of a life commitment itself.

So Cash is in the bullpen, concentrating on the pitching machine, which is being fed rag balls made of a sticky, carpetlike material. "What happens is, they stick to the machine as they go through, so they come out like a knuckleball," Cash explains. "It's not as good as Wake's, of course, but they move a lot. And when you think about it, how else can you practice catching a knuckleball?"

Such is the way of the knuckleball, always inspiring more questions than answers. For decades, it has been baseball's most impish pitch, 67 mph of mischief. It was, according to Willie Stargell, a butterfly with hiccups. Bobby Murcer said hitting a knuckleball was like trying to eat Jell-O with chopsticks. Phil Niekro's knuckler, Rick Monday once said, giggled as it went by.



Cash starts about every fifth day, but he doesn't do much resting in between.

'I always thought the knuckleball was the easiest pitch to catch. Wait'll it stops rolling, then go to the backstop and pick it up.' -Broadcaster and former catcher Bob Uecker 'You don't catch the knuckleball-

—Dodgers manager and former major league catcher Joe Torre

you defend

against it.'

Woe to the hitter who tries to take an honest cut at a top-shelf knuckleball.

Woe, too, to the guy assigned to catch Wakefield, the best knuckleballer of his generation. For the six previous years, Wakefield had worked almost exclusively with Doug Mirabelli. But when Mirabelli was released in the middle of March, the job fell to Cash, a 30-year-old journeyman. "It was a little bit of a surprise," Cash says. "It wasn't something I had done very much. So, I just said, 'OK, this is my job now.' "

And what a job. Cash does preparation drills every day. Sometimes, he works with the rag ball; other times, he does a drill in which, barehanded, he catches miniature balls-about the size of a gumball—tossed to him rapid-fire.

"It's just keeping your hand-eye coordination

sharp," Cash says. "You can't catch a knuckleball like you do other pitches, where you know where it is going and you can put your glove there and wait for the ball. With a knuckleball, no one knows where it is going. You have to wait on it. They call it being 'lazy.' You wait to move the glove at the last second or else it's going by you."

That part—"going by you" haunts most knuckleball catchers. In 1987, Texas catcher Geno Petralli set a big league record by allowing 35 passed balls, mostly while handling knuckleballer Charlie Hough. Petralli declared, "It's the most difficult thing there is to do in the game. Really, the second-toughest

thing is to hit it. The first toughest is to catch it."

Wakefield saw how tough it was in early 2006, when Boston let Mirabelli go to San Diego and made Josh Bard his replacement. Bard really struggled, allowing 10 passed balls in five Wakefield outings. That forced Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein to beg the Padres for Mirabelli's return and set up the unforgettable sight of Mirabelli, hours after being traded back to Boston, getting a police escort from the airport to Fenway while changing into his uniform just in time to catch Wakefield that night.

Wakefield wasn't happy with the sudden release of Mirabelli-his friend as well as his catcher-this spring. But he has developed a rapport with Cash. "It's been smooth," Wakefield says. "I know it is not an easy thing for a catcher to learn to do, but he has handled it well."

Even when the knuckler is handled well, though, the stats are ugly. Passed balls are inevitable. Cash has been pretty good on that count, allowing five in his first nine Wakefield games.

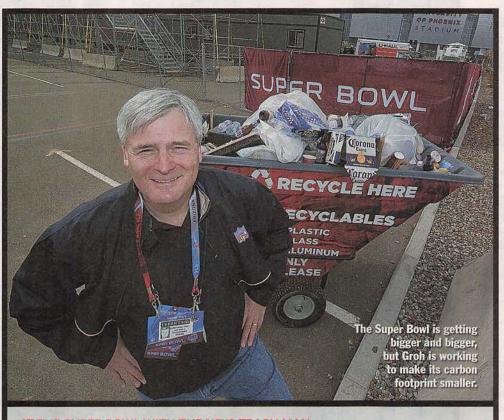
Throwing out baserunners, though, is another story. Runners have stolen 13 bases in 16 attempts against Cash and Wakefield.

Cash isn't happy about that. "I have not thrown out the runners I want—I don't care if Wake is pitching or whoever," Cash says. "People think that when he is on the mound, they can just take that bag, but it's my job to keep that thought from coming across their minds. I don't accept that I am just going to have bad numbers and everyone is going to steal on me. It's a

pride thing."

Bad numbers and wounded pride, though, are part of the job. Being a knuckleballer's catcher is an ironic existence, one in which the better the pitcher, the tougher the job. As Cash says, "The funny thing is, when Tim is at his best, his ball moves so much. And that's when it is hardest to catch."

So, you're always hoping that your job is hard? Weird. "Exactly," Cash says. Which is why he keeps working at it.



AT THE SUPER BOWL WITH THE NFL'S TRASH MAN

WHEN THE PARTY'S OVER

The Super Bowl is the biggest party of the year. Jack Groh, director of the NFL Environmental Program, works to make sure the mess left behind is as limited as possible.

What does the environmental program do? We identify the environmental impacts of the Super Bowl on the host community and then develop projects to reduce those impacts in partnership with local organizations and agencies. A large portion of the materials left over are recycled or reused rather than

We've analyzed the amount of greenhouse gas produced and tried to develop ways to reduce it. We have used renewable energy (wind, solar, geothermal, etc.) to power the stadium and other events. We have also used hundreds of flex fuel and hybrid vehicles. Another ongoing project has been planting trees to help absorb greenhouse gas and to help restore native habitat and watershed areas. In Arizona this year, we planted more than 10,000 trees.

How many pounds of recyclables did this year's Super Bowl generate? The two main areas of recycling were the Phoenix Convention Center, which housed the media center, and the stadium complex. At these two sites we recycled 58,000 pounds of solid waste.

How many pounds of leftover food was donated this year? We recover as much food that is prepared but never makes it onto serving tables as possible. In Phoenix, we worked with the local food banks to donate 93,000 pounds-a Super Bowl record. The Giants donated food and leftover materials and office supplies, a first for a Super Bowl team. -Matt Crossman

BEHIND THE SCENES AT DEADSPIN.COM

Stay-at-home

I recently had a well-publicized dustup with Pulitzer Prize-winning author Buzz Bissinger on the set of Costas NOW. Bissinger, a wonderful writer, decided to use me, as "well-known" as any blogger could possibly be (which is to say, "not very"), as a vessel to vent his invective against, well, the Internet, apparently.

But I found a better example of what life as a blogger is like backstage, in the greenroom. All sorts of sporting bigwigs were there, from Joe Buck to Mitch Albom to John McEnroe to that guy from New York who's always screaming on the radio. Somehow, I ended up being introduced to Cris Carter, formerly from HBO Sports (and the Minnesota Vikings) and now on ESPN.

I shook his hand. "Hello, I'm Will."

Cris frowned, and even sneaked in a scowl. "Are you the blog guy?" I smiled. The best way, I've learned, to deal with the hostility is just to smile. They're not expecting that. I suspect they all think we look like the Comic Book Guy from The Simpsons or, more sinister, like a member of the thrash metal group GWAR. "Yes, sir, I do write a blog."

Cris' scowl was no longer sneaky. "You know, I got a problem with you," the Ohio State grad said, through gritted teeth. "Some Michigan blog said I was an a-hole. Better nobody say that to my face."

Smiling, trying to look calm, I said, "Well, sir, you know, I didn't write that."

Cris took a step closer to me. "You damn well better not of, 'cause if you had, I'd take you out right here." I smiled, again, shook his hand, and went on my way.

What's life as a professional sports blogger like? Amazingly, really freaking fun. As long as I don't leave the house.

-Will Leitch

e holds a desk phone against his left ear, presses his cell phone to his right ear and would be having a third conversation if he had another phone, another hand and another ear. The NFL draft is over, but C.O. Brocato is just warming up. A car salesman with a full inventory in the last week of December wouldn't do this much yapping.

If you think the selection of Mr. Irrelevant signals the end of the hunt for NFL talent, you've never watched Brocato operate for 140 minutes—140 minutes at 140 mph—of wheeling and dealing with undrafted players and their agents.

This is the draft's unofficial eighth round. ESPN doesn't televise it, and your newspaper reports it in agate type, not 48-point headlines. But it is an important phase for teams building their rosters.

Brocato, 78, has worked two tours of duty for the Titans/Houston Oilers for a total of 33 years and is the club's national supervisor of college scouting. Since last fall, he has driven thousands of miles, watched hundreds of DVDs and sat in too many meetings for too many hours—all to prepare for the draft.

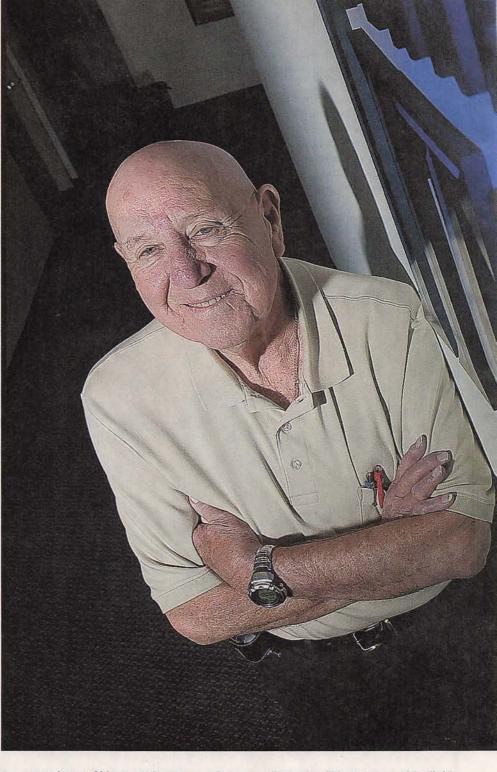
Now, he is taking his last step in this annual journey. He is playing the roles of salesman, recruiter, cheerleader and negotiator as he tries to help the Titans fill a few last holes.

t 4:30 p.m., Brocato emerges from a meeting room on the second floor of the Titans' training complex in Nashville, walks down a hallway and turns into an office. The Titans have just made their final pick in the draft, halfway through the seventh round, and Brocato (along with nine other scouts) is ready to pursue potential free agents. He has the names of three players: Oklahoma running back Allen Patrick, Houston safety Rocky Schwartz and Arkansas wide receiver Marcus Monk.

Brocato calls Patrick's cell phone several times but doesn't get an answer. Then he reaches Craig Domann, Patrick's agent, and says, "Keep me in mind."

Next, he calls Schwartz and tells him the Titans are strongly interested in signing him if he doesn't get drafted. To hammer home the point, Brocato hands the phone to secondary coach Chuck Cecil. "You're the guy that we want who's left for us," Cecil tells Schwartz. "You're my guy. We'd like to have you here in Nashville."

Players want to feel loved. The Titans aren't shy about bringing in the heavy artillery—position coaches, head coach Jeff Fisher or general



manager Mike Reinfeldt—to stroke the egos of potential prospects.

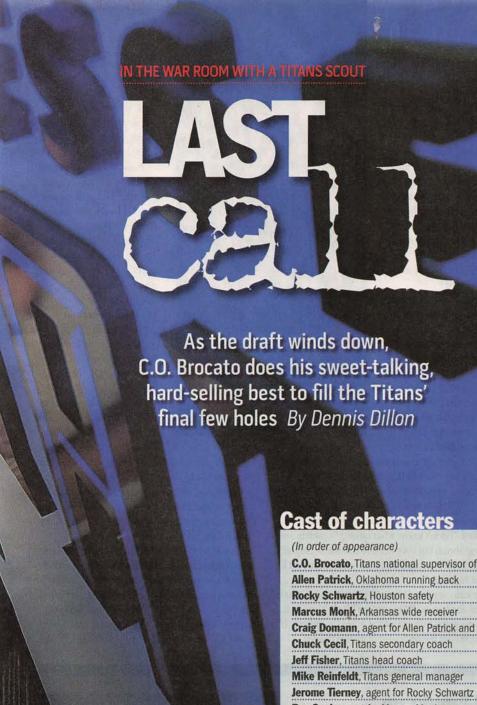
Brocato calls Schwartz's agent, Jerome Tierney. "We're very interested in Rocky, and he's got a chance to make the team," Brocato says. "As soon as this thing is over, I'm going to get back to you and close the deal."

He calls Patrick again. Still no answer. "I can't understand why he won't answer the phone," Brocato says.

Brocato calls Bus Cook, who represents Monk. Don Weatherell, Cook's partner, answers. Brocato tells Weatherell the Titans would "really like to have" Monk and that he'll get back to him when the draft is over. Weatherell mentions a signing bonus figure. "Well, we weren't quite looking at that, but I'll go back and mention it.... OK, I'll see what I can do."

The Titans' policy for undrafted free agents is to sign them to two-year contracts worth \$295,000 for the first year and \$385,000 for the second—the NFL's minimum standard. Occasionally, the team will throw in a bonus offer.

As Brocato talks to Domann again, Phil Neri,



one of the Titans' scouts, comes in to report the Ravens drafted Patrick. "OK, Craig, tell him I said congratulations," Brocato says.

Brocato goes back to the war room. When he returns, he has a new prospect: Texas defensive tackle Derek Lokey. "I know you're down in the dumps, but hold your head up high," Brocato tells Lokey, adding that the Titans are interested in signing him. Lokey tells Brocato he wants to "research" 10 or 15 teams before making a deci-

"Well, let me say this, Lokey. You're going to

C.O. Brocato, Titans national supervisor of college scouting

Craig Domann, agent for Allen Patrick and D.J. Wolfe

Bus Cook, agent for Marcus Monk

Don Weatherell, Bus Cook's partner

Phil Neri, Titans college scout

Derek Lokey, Texas defensive tackle

Jim Washburn, Titans defensive line coach

Jordan Woy, agent for Derek Lokey

Blake Beddingfield, Titans scouting coordinator

D.J. Wolfe, Oklahoma safety

have to research it quick, because here's what happens. Clubs can only bring in 80 players (to training camp), and they have only so many players they can sign. If somebody offers you something, you're going to have to make a decision with your agent. I'm just saying, don't get left holding the basket and there's nothing in it."

As Brocato talks to Lokey, defensive line coach Jim Washburn sits close by. He's as interested in Lokev as Cecil is in Schwartz.

Brocato calls Jordan Woy, who represents Lokey. He tells Woy that Washburn is eager to land Lokey and that Lokey has a chance to make the Titans' roster. "Lokey is the type of guy Jim Washburn likes: a tough guy who's going to bust his butt. And we're comparing him to (Kyle) Vanden Bosch, with that kind of effort. So just keep me in mind." Brocato gives Woy his cell

Cecil comes back into the office. Brocato calls Tierney again.

"I just want you to know we still want Rocky bad," Brocato says. "Money's not the question; it's a question of whether he can play, and I know he's going to get a fair shake to make our football team. I think he could make it just on special teams, and we regard him as being a backup safety. ... We'll start you off with a \$7,000 signing bonus, and I'll see if I can get more. ... Hang on. ... Hey, Jerry? Be a deal. I can get 10 (thousand). Let me give you my cell number."

With the fifth-to-last pick in the draft, the Bears select Monk.

"That's two I wanted," says Brocato. "That's what happens. You talk to these people, then all of a sudden they get drafted. If I get Schwartz, I'm going to

> quit. I want to get him and then this defensive tackle from Texas."

> At 5:40 p.m., Blake Beddingfield, the Titans' scouting coordinator, walks in to tell Brocato the draft is over. Now the hunt intensifies.

hen Brocato arrived in Nashville for predraft meetings two weeks earlier, having made the 10-hour drive from his home in Arlington, Texas, he brought with him entrees for an Italian feast.

Spaghetti and meatballs.

Veal parmigiana.

Chicken parmigiana.

Desserts made by his daughter.

The food, which Brocato had

cooked and brought in freezer bags, was stored in a freezer at the Titans' facility. Then, three days ago, Brocato prepared his annual predraft meal for everyone in the building.

It is nearing dinnertime now, but Brocato has an appetite only for football players.

He calls Tierney again. The Titans flew

Schwartz into town for a predraft visit, and all the coaches were excited about the possibility of drafting him or signing him as a free agent. Now Brocato learns the Titans are in competition with the Saints for Schwartz. He tells Tierney the Titans want Schwartz and he'll wait on his return call.

Brocato turns his attention to Lokey. "Jordan wants me to make an offer for Lokey, but I ain't got no money so I doubt I'll get him."

Washburn comes in. "Jeff and Mike said go get him," Washburn says. "They'll make room for him"

Brocato calls Woy.

"Jordan, what kind of deal are we looking at for Lokey?"

"Lokey's got about 12 teams trying to sign him, so you've got to be up there pretty high. Somewhere around \$12,000 to \$15,000. I know that's a lot higher than you guys like to go."

"I know it. But he's got a chance here."

"How many D-tackles are you going to bring to amp?"

"We've got (Albert) Haynesworth and (Tony) Brown. Those are the main ones."

"And how many do you think are going to make the team?"

"Four."

"Besides Lokey, who would you sign?"

"Nobody."

"You're saying you think he has a great chance to come in and win a roster spot?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, give me an offer. Money matters, but it's not going to be the main criteria. He wants to go somewhere where he can make the team."

"I think he'd have a great shot here. What I've got to do, Jordan, is talk to Mike Reinfeldt. We didn't have anything here for him originally, but I want him here. I'll call you right back in a few minutes when I find out something."

"OK"

Now, Brocato is waiting to hear what he can offer Lokey and waiting to hear from Tierney about Schwartz. "C'mon, Jerry," he says to himself. "We can't wait all day."

Brocato learns he can offer Lokey a \$2,000 bonus. He calls Woy and leaves a message. "Jordan? C.O. Give me a call, please, at 615 ..."

Cecil comes in again, checking on the status of Schwartz. "Wow, this must be hard," he says.

Brocato holds his cell phone in his left hand, his fingers wrapped around it in a Texas death grip. Reinfeldt and Fisher walk into the office to check on Brocato's prog-

ress. "Everybody else is done. We're just waiting on you," says Reinfeldt. He's kidding.

Brocato calls Woy again. "Jordan. C.O. Give me a call. 615 ... waitin' on ya."

He wonders why he hasn't heard back from Tierney. "I don't know what he and Schwartz are talking about, but they need to call me back. He's going to fool around and lose some money. I'll give it to Lokey."

Brocato reaches Woy and offers him a \$2,000 bonus for Lokey. Woy says he'll call him back. Brocato gives him his office phone number. "If you don't get me on that, call me on the cell."



Brocato calls Tierney, who informs him that Schwartz has chosen to sign with New Orleans. Apparently, a call from Saints coach Sean Payton helped persuade Schwartz.

Now Brocato has lost all three of his original players. His cell phone rings. He answers it and frowns. Then he starts laughing. When he hangs up, he explains it was a scouting buddy from another team calling to ask if C.O. was interested in signing him. It's an annual prank.

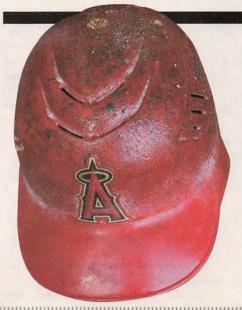
Brocato calls Woy again. He finds out Lokey is going to sign with Kansas City.

Beddingfield comes in and says the Titans still need a safety. He asks Brocato to call Oklahoma's

D.J. Wolfe. Brocato talks to Wolfe. Then he calls Domann, Wolfe's agent. He talks to Wolfe again. In the middle of that conversation, Beddingfield comes in and makes a throat-slashing sign. The Titans just agreed to a contract with Florida safety Tony Joiner.

It's 6:50 p.m. The chase is over. The Titans have agreed to terms with 10 undrafted players, including five who were on their original target list. Brocato, who usually gets several prospects, was shut out. But he could easily land a handful next year.

For now, he's just looking forward to a nice meal
—and not having to make any phone calls. SN



Cleaning up the game

There might be no piece of equipment in sports dirtier than Vladimir Guerrero's helmet—although Major League Baseball is doing its best to clean it up. This spring, it warned teams it would fine players whose helmets were deemed too dirty. That's why you can see the Angels logo on this year's version (left) of Vlad's helmet.

So how is it that Guerrero's head protector winds up so much dirtier than the average hitter's? He doesn't wear batting gloves, so he uses pine tar, stored on his helmet, to grip the bat.



DON'T JUST STAND THERE, OUST & MOVE

When he lines up to smash the wedge, Israel Idonije knows injury is as likely as a highlight-reel moment. But he loves his job—even if it requires him to be just a little bit nuts. By Mike Nahrstedt

ined up 4 yards behind Robbie Gould, Israel Idonije is pumped. Gould is about to open the Bears' 2007 season with a kickoff to San Diego's Darren Sproles, and Idonije gets to fly 60 yards downfield, find the wedge in front of Sproles and try to smash it to kingdom come.

Dirty work? Yeah. Busting the wedge certainly isn't the most glamorous job in football. But it is the most violent—"the most physically sacrificial aspect of the game," as Idonije calls it.

And he loves it.

You're not blocking me today, Idonije thinks, eyeballing the Chargers in front of him.

Wedge busting doesn't involve lots of technique. On contact, stay low, keep your head up and drive through the guy. That's about it. The key is identifying the return scheme and reacting properly. Which is just what Idonije does as he begins his sprint downfield.

B.A. is in my lane.

Brendon Ayanbadejo, a two-time Pro Bowl pick for his special teams work (who was signed by Baltimore in March), is smaller and faster than Idonije and makes more tackles. That's because while Idonije typically tries to go through the wedge, Ayanbadejo runs around it and comes in from behind. This time, though, it is Ayanbadejo who makes first contact, knocking linebacker Stephen Cooper aside around midfield. Idonije's first line of defense is eliminated.

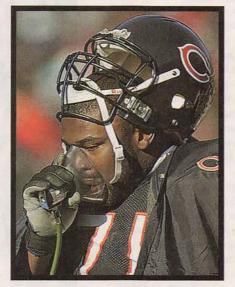
Thanks, Brendon.

OK, the wedge is forming to my left.

Once Idonije reads the play, it's all-out mayhem—and he has a distinct advantage. He's a 6-6, 297-pound defensive lineman yet plenty fast for sprint work. As wedge busters go, he's a freak. For the fullbacks, linebackers and tight ends who typically form the wedge—and, worse yet, for the



The approach by Gould (9) signals Idonije (71) to start a sprint that allows him to lay serious smack on somebody downfield.



returner—the sight of a man that large moving that fast can be unsettling, if not frightening.

Good thing for me. Makes my job easier.

On this return, for a change, there isn't much to slow him down. A four-man wedge forms in front of Sproles, moving to his right, but the left side of the wedge is wide-open, partly due to a breakdown in the blocking scheme that has produced a pile of bodies in front of Idonije.

Man, look at that mess. Sproles isn't going that

vay.

Linebacker Tim Dobbins steps up to offer Idonije some resistance at the San Diego 30, but Idonije flicks him aside, cuts left—and comes face to face with Sproles, a sitting duck 4 yards in front of him.

All right, Sproles, here goes. It's you and me now.

Sproles tries to cut to his left to avoid the tackle, but Idonije pops him on the left shoulder and Sproles goes down hard at the 19. Sproles gets up but spends the rest of the day on the sideline with a concussion.

Lights out, baby. Hope you feel better soon.

This is what a wedge buster lives for—not to inflict injury but to make the play. It's one thing to blow holes in a wedge and watch one of the smaller guys make the tackle. That's usually how it works, and there is satisfaction in that. But it's oh-so-much better to stop the returner cold and send his mouthguard flying. Either way, the joy is in the contact.

When you hit somebody and you keep your feet and he falls down and he gets up and he's dazed and running sideways—what a rush!

At no point does Idonije feel fear. Earlier on this day, Buffalo's Kevin Everett is doing the same thing as Idonije, tackling a kickoff returner, when he crumples to the turf with a serious neck injury. Everett eventually walks again, miraculously, months later. During that time Idonije is concerned, of course, about Everett's health. But it doesn't change how he plays.

You can't think about it. When you hear about a car accident, do you change the way you drive the next day? No, you drive the same.

Which, for a wedge buster, is with all-out abandon.

Get off the ball. Recognize what's going on.
Then just play with a little bit of crazy.

AT THE FINAL FOUR WITH A KANSAS WALK-ON

THE STORY BEHIND

You really can't miss Matt Kleinmann. He's the 6-10 redhead wearing the Kansas warmups and a giant smile, rooting on his teammates from the Jayhawks' bench. That's just his glamour job, though. This walk-on junior's real work is done behind the scenes-banging down low with the other bigs in practice. He has been crushed by KU's rare defeats—back-to-back upset losses in the NCAA Tournament—and elated by the numerous victories—back-to-backto-back Big 12 Tournament titles. Nothing, though, prepared him for the Jayhawks' run to the 2008 national championship.

The best practice I've ever had was right before we played North Ask any freshman—OK, maybe

Carolina. I was Tyler Hansbrough for that hour and a half, wearing a No. 50 Velcro jersey that our team managers had rigged up. And I must have been channeling some of Hansbrough because I probably had 12 or 14 points just from 10 minutes of working on his style. You can call it slop or whatever you want, but as one of our coaches put it later: "Matt was getting buckets today."

A couple weeks earlier, I had gotten to play Michael Beasley in practice, with Brandon Rush trying to guard me one-on-one. They told me to shoot it every time I touched the ball, and I threw up three or four air-

Before the Carolina game, everybody was saying, all right, let's stop Matt. They told me to do what Hansbrough does-give a little shot fake, drive to the basket and try to get fouled as you put up a shot. I was out there, getting double-teamed and triple-teamed during practice, and I remember thinking, "There's no way I'm the only one who would have problems with these guys. There's no way anybody can get past this."

Turns out I was right.

That semifinal game in San Antonio, when our bigs locked up Hansbrough, that might have been the only time I ever felt the satisfaction of knowing that my role really did play a direct part.

Ask any freshman-OK, maybe not Beasley or Derrick Rose-and they'll tell you they're not prepared for those first couple of months of college basketball. And I didn't just jump one level; I jumped two levels. I went from an OK, pretty-good high school player from a small area to one of the top-level college programs in the country. I came in with guys like Darnell Jackson, Russell Robinson and Sasha Kaun, all amazing athletes.

The biggest issue I had to deal with back then was fouling. I remember I was out there trying to prove myself. A couple of times coach (Bill) Self yelled at me because I was fouling too much. It's one thing to foul people, but it's another thing when you're fouling Wayne Simien, first-team All-American and the backbone of the program.

Simien was cool about it, though. I really felt like he was a mentor to me personally. A lot through his faith, a lot through how he handled himself on and off the court. Coach Self used to ask him to lead the team in prayer before meals, and then that was something Christian Moody took on. Now coach asks me to do that. It's a role I take very seriously.

That first year, though, I was really wondering whether I had made the

Kleinmann didn't play a minute in the title game, but that doesn't mean he didn't earn the right to raise the trophy.



42 . SEE A DIFFERENT GAME . 5/26/08



Thanks to the advice of his brother, Kleinmann spent the title game slapping hands with Robinson rather than watching it on TV.

right choice. I wasn't quite the player everyone else was. But Christian, a guy Billy Packer once called the greatest walk-on ever—maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but still—was a big influence on me. Watching him earn a starting job alongside the scholarship players, I saw that, and I said: "You know what? If it works out for me, it works out. It's not going to be a handicap."

I was really close to playing ball for the University of Pacific, but something my older brother told me really stuck with me. He said that if I went to a smaller school, I might be lucky enough that we'd win our conference tournament and have a shot at playing a game in the NCAA Tournament. But if I went to Kansas, there was a chance that I'd be sitting down every five years, hanging out with guys that I had won a national champi-

onship with. And besides, the idea of suiting up in a Kansas jersey was just something a kid from nearby Overland Park couldn't turn down.

he three years of finishing below expectations in the NCAA Tournament had really built up, and this whole year has been about, "Don't be satisfied." Even after beating Davidson to

After the game, the

coaches teased me and

the tape, and they saw

me run on the court

said later they'd watched

before the clock ran out.

get into the Final Four, in that moment of elation, after all that was done, Darnell Jackson spoke up and said, "Guys, this isn't what we're here for. We're

not satisfied yet. We're here to win two more games."

After beating Carolina, we were one win away. But with two minutes left in the national championship game, we were down seven, and the thought was, "This might be out of reach."

Here's the thing I couldn't get out of my mind: I was going to have to talk to Sasha, Darnell and Russell, and say, "Man, I'm sorry. We got so close, but I still respect what you guys did. You guys did better than what anybody else could have imag-

ined." I was dreading that. Those were not the words I wanted to have to tell my friends before we left San Antonio.

But then Sherron Collins hit that 3-pointer and we started roaring back. And the shot that Mario Chalmers hit to tie the game will go down as one of the greatest shots ever. There will be kids for the next 20 years practicing that shot in their backyard hoops.

After the game, the coaches teased me and said later they'd watched the tape, and they saw me run on the court before the clock ran out. So that could have gotten a technical foul, Memphis would have gotten two free throws and the ball back. Might have made it close. They were giving me a hard time about that, but I know they were just messing with me.

Then the buzzer sounded, and we went crazy. The moment that will stand out most clearly in

my mind was looking at my roommate of three years, Sasha Kaun, and just saying, "We did it." Then I thought of something that coach Self would ask Danny Manning whenever he'd talk about the national championship: "Is there ever a day where you

don't think about winning it all?" and Danny would always say, "No."

I don't know exactly how many days it's been now for me, but I can honestly say that, so far, that's true. —As told to Ryan Fagan

ON THE BEAT WITH A RECRUITING WRITER

Full-time bleacher bum

There was a time when Eric Bossi dressed nicely, commuted to an office and managed business affairs at major corporations. Now he does most of his work at home: He calls up teenagers and asks where they might eventually play college basketball.

"I think I'm pretty lucky," Bossi says.

He may think he's lucky, but chasing kids around, trying to get them to talk to you, isn't exactly glamorous. Bossi is part of the burgeoning enterprise of college recruiting coverage, which has exploded in the past decade. Based in Roeland Park, Kan., he has several jobs (and several bosses to answer to), including popular websites Phog.net and Inside Carolina. He considers his primary business to be his scouting service, eBoss Hoops.

Bossi showed dedication to his craft on one of his first assignments. He was covering the 2001 Sabes Invitational tournament in the Minneapolis area and staying with a friend to save money. After going out on the town following games on a Friday night, he "wound up in some random house party on the opposite side of town." He was ready to leave about 5 a.m. but



When the next 15-year-old commits, Bossi hopes to be the one to get it all on tape.

didn't have enough for a cab to his friend's apartment. He was able, however, to cover the fare to the Hamline University gym, site of a Saturday morning 16-under game featuring future Kansas star Brandon

"I had to be at that game," Bossi says. "I don't know what my plan was, but when I got there the doors to the gym happened to be open. I walked in, looked around a little and grabbed myself a spot on the bleachers to sleep. I was woken up by the players coming in and getting ready to play that game."

One of his duties is checking on basket-

ball prospects to keep up with the schools they are considering—and trying to beat others to the punch when those choices ultimately are made.

This wouldn't be such a chore if not for the fact each school involved with a prospect is covered by one or two team sites, plus one or two newspapers, plus three or four national recruiting services, plus the coaches doing the recruiting. That's a lot of calls for a kid to handle.

"From 2002 up until a year ago, I thought kids seemed to get really worn down and beaten up by it because these kinds of fan sites really took off," Bossi says. "Kids now who are juniors or seniors—they've grown up in this environment that you've got to get your name out on the Internet to get exposure. They just look at it as part of the deal." —Mike DeCourcy

INSIDE THE WISCONSIN FOOTBALL OFFICES

'MINIBAR KEYS

SHOULD NOT BE

AVAILABLE ...'

'HEAVY ON

BANANAS'

sweating the small stuff

You don't know Bill Nayes, and that's a good thing. It means he's doing his job well.

They might not notice Nayes in the University of Wisconsin football offices, but they know he's there. Coach Bret Bielema sits in an office just a few feet from him. Bielema has to be within

yelling distance of the guy who takes care of all those dirty details that keep his team humming.

Do the players know we are practicing indoors today, Bill?

Will we get to the stadium in time to do a walk-through before we go to the hotel, Bill?

What was up with that turkey tetrazzini we had for the pregame meal, Bill?

And so it goes for Nayes, the program's director of football operations. He says he

isn't a football junkie, but he regularly pulls 80-hour weeks during the season. Nayes has a hand in setting up security on the road and planning meals and organizing camps in the summer. Basically, if it doesn't involve blocking, tackling or sweating, he is involved.

The fall helps Nayes slide into a routine as Wisconsin marches through the rhythm of its season. But it also brings the highest level of stress. That's when the Badgers hit the road five or six times. Flights must be booked, bus arrangements made and hotels lined up.

No matter how good of a deal Nayes has negotiated or how well he has communicated needs to hotels and airlines, things go wrong. And that's when it happens. He gets "the look" from Bielema. "It's the same look your mother used to give you when you did something wrong," Nayes says. "Bret

doesn't have to say anything. I just look at him and say, 'I know.' "

But that doesn't happen often, which is why Nayes is considered one of the best in the business. He honed his trade in similar posts with the NFL's Packers and Seahawks. Still, Nayes knocks his hand against a wood table because he

knows his job relies on others doing theirs.

No detail is too small. Nayes has prepared a packet of information for hotels that spells out every want and need for the traveling band of Badgers. Some of the details:

- There should never be an incident in which the team is ready to eat and the meal is not set to go.
- Room temperature should be on the cool side of comfortable.
- Minibar keys

should not be available to any rooms.

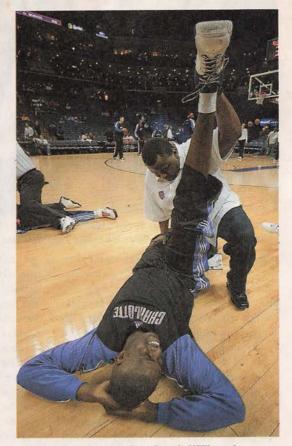
For each meal: Whole fresh fruit (apples, bananas, oranges, strawberries, grapes, etc.)—HEAVY ON BANANAS.

There even is a diagram for how a room is supposed to be set up for meals. In case you're wondering, the Badgers require two double-sided buffet lines with the flow going away from the room entry.

"We don't want any surprises," Nayes says. "The players and staff have enough to worry about without dealing with any distractions."

Nayes doesn't exhale until Wisconsin's plane touches down on its return flight and he peers out his window and sees buses waiting to take the team to Camp Randall Stadium.

"The end is near then," he says. "Then, we start it all back up the next week." —Tom Dienhart



↑ Bobcats assistant trainer Dennis Williams is looking on the bright side—at least Nazr Mohammed isn't too sweaty yet.

All in a day's WORK

→ In a 2004 Busch race at Daytona, Johnny Sauter missed his pit and sent front tire changer Patrick Shafer sailing. It looks like a textbook case of workman's comp, but Shafer wasn't seriously injured.



For more behind-the-scenes photos of sports' dirty jobs, go to sportingnews.com.

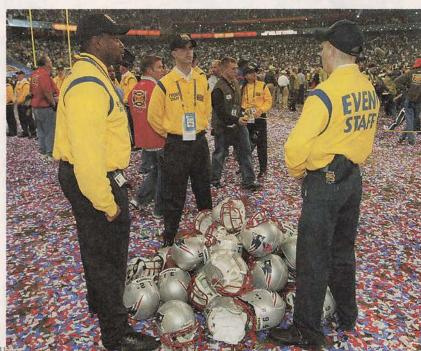




↑Life as the Ball
State mascot is fun
and furry, but inside
that gigantic head, it
also gets sweaty and
stinky. And the
opportunities for injury
are ample: Remember
Randall Simon's
sausage-bashing
incident?

♦Sure he gets to spend Sundays field-level at Lambeau, but would you trade your spot on the couch for this?







↑Tigers clubbies know, the cleaner the cleat, the bigger the tip.



↑For St. Louis Cardinals assistant equipment manager Ernie Moore, it's another day, another dollar ... another dirty sock, another sweaty jockstrap.

t may be mind-numbing, but the members of the Super Bowl event staff take helmet guarding very seriously.

Money buys speed—and happiness

By Mike Hembree

ver the past 20 years, more than a few stock car racing truisms have been bumped from the Book of Universal Motorsports Knowledge. Such as:

Superspeedway racing is for afternoon hours only. Humpy Wheeler, a man willing to take a chance, proved this wrong in 1992 when he lit up Lowe's Motor Speedway and ran The Winston all-star race at night. The world followed. Now almost every track is lighted, and the ones that aren't want to be.

You can't run races on Mother's Day weekend. Darlington has proved this one wrong with Saturday night sellouts.

Formula One drivers are jetsetters and have no place in NASCAR. See Montoya, Juan Pablo.

But generally speaking, change does come hard for NASCAR,

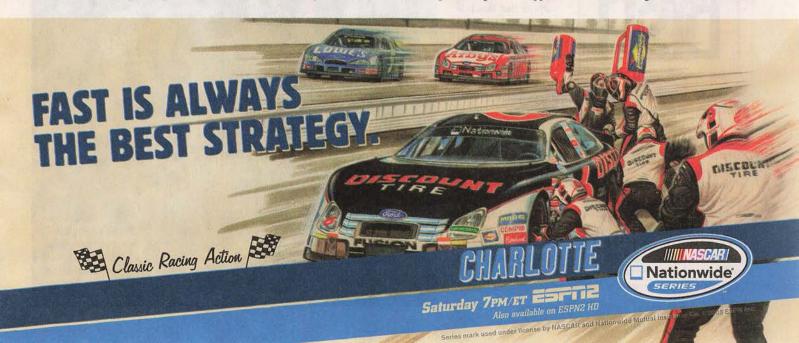
and one does not approach the gods of stock car racing lightly with ideas of upheaval. One truth that isn't likely to change in the near or distant future: Money buys speed. As the late car builder



It's one thing to win a race now and then-Kasey Kahne took the all-star event-but another to sustain success.

and high-performance master Banjo Matthews used to ask, "How fast do you want to go?"

Drivers come and go. Crew chiefs shine and then sag. Car owners roar into the sport with guns blazing and sometimes bolt a year later with tails firmly tucked between their legs. The landscape changes, new speedways open, Cars of Tomorrow appear, race dates change, and Bruton Smith



NASCAR INSIDER

annexes another county or two. But the bottom line remains the bottom line: Dollars move you to the top in this sport.

To go green, you need green.

The teams that rule in Sprint Cup racing have the biggest payrolls. They have the latest equipment, the best front office people, top-notch public relations managers, engineers who could figure out the fastest way to Mars without pitting and crew chiefs who could plot strategy for the final laps of a race while figuring out the square root of the national debt.

Critics of the public education system in the United States say money is not the answer. Well, it might not be the full answer, but it is a very good place to start. More money gets you better teachers, better facilities (have you tried to do logarithms in a classroom without air conditioning?) and textbooks that have been written since the end of the Vietnam War.

In racing, money gets you everything. It attracts the best drivers, not only because of the size of their paychecks but because they know money also attracts the best mechanics and engineers. Unlike the good old days, you don't build great racing teams simply because people love the sport and want to come on board to *help* you create a winner. They want to share the loot—not just the good times.

Look at the teams dominating the points standings and you'll see that they are flush with cash and aren't hesitant about spending it. Teams struggling to make the last leap to the top—like Chip Ganassi Racing, Penske Racing, Gillett Evernham Motorsports and Dale Earnhardt Inc.—have to play catchup by writing bigger checks.

Somewhere they're lacking, and that somewhere might not be located until enough money is spent to bring in the right people to set up the right framework to build the best racecars and race strategies.

Money won't solve every issue, but it will make you go fast. And faster. And frequently, fastest.

Money does buy speed.

Mike Hembree is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Hembree at scenedaily.com.

speedreads

Brian Vickers is my sleeper pick to win the Coca-Cola 600 at Lowe's. He has been quiet since his solid run three races ago at Talladega, but he led 76 laps in last year's 600 and 98 in the 2005 event.

Matt Kenseth may be 20th in points, but there's no reason to count him out of the Chase picture. Just remember his remarkable comeback to make the party in 2005.

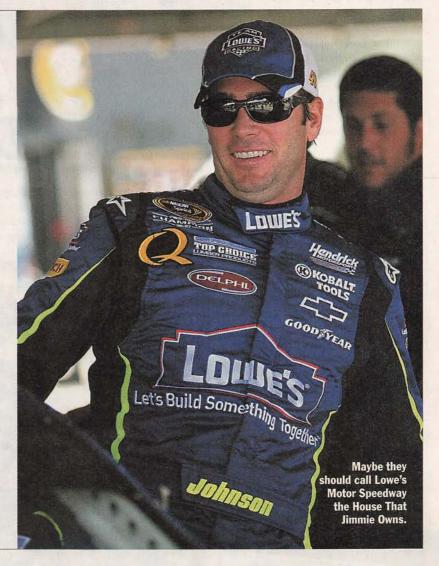
Kasey Kahne had some early-season momentum and won the all-star race last week. But not so fast. In points events, Kahne has just one top 10 in the last six races. If he can't get untracked in the 600 this Sunday—he swept both races at Lowe's in 2006—be very concerned. —Roger Kuznia

Carl Edwards would much rather race against Greg Biffle as a teammate than as a competitor for another organization. Edwards believes Biffle's presence strengthens Roush Fenway Racing and doesn't want to see Biffle taking what he has learned at Roush Fenway somewhere else. Biffle's contract with Roush ends this year. "I think he's one of the most talented drivers ever in the sport," Edwards says. "We've always got along, and when we're testing somewhere, he helps me a lot. I feel like we work well together, so I'd hate to see him go somewhere else. Everybody in the garage knows that he's fast." > Given his performance this season in NASCAR's top three series—eight wins in



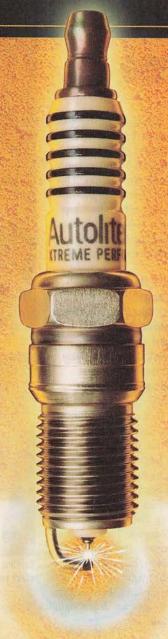
28 starts—maybe it's true **Kyle Busch** can drive anything. So it should come as no surprise that Busch is trying to get behind the wheel in a Formula One car. "We're working on a test session right now at the end of

November or beginning of December, going to Japan and doing a little exhibition," Busch says. "We'll take the Cup car over there, too, I think. Show them what the Cup cars are like and try to get in the Formula One car, too." Does that mean Busch has an interest in trying his hand at Formula One racing? "We'll see how good I test, first," he says. > Jimmie Johnson's finishes of 10th and 14th in 2007 Cup races at Lowe's Motor Speedway ended an unbelievable four-year run of eight finishes of third or better, including five wins. He has led laps in 12 of his 13 races at the track, coming up empty only in his first race at Lowe's, in October 2001, which was his first Cup start. He is especially strong in the Coca-Cola 600, NASCAR's longest race, which will be run Sunday. He has never finished outside the top 10 in six 600s and has three wins and one second-place finish.



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The players named were expected to struggle mightily, but it hasn't turned out that way.

The call on the Mitchell Report's impact: toll-free

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

afe to say that, sitting down for lunch last December 13, turning on the television and finding out that former Sen. George Mitchell had included your name among the dozens listed in his report as performance-enhancing drug users would be enough to make your jaw drop into your soup. Some of the names—say, Cody McKay and F.P. Santangelo—were long forgotten. Some—like David Justice and Fernando Vina—were well-known but retired. Still others—think Nook Logan, Jay Gibbons and (ahem) Barry Bonds—were on the outs as big league players. Of course, there was Roger Clemens, and we know what consequences that has brought.

Most interesting, though, were the 22 active players the report listed. These guys had to get back into the clubhouse and onto the field in 2008. Some admitted guilt, some did not. Either way, they figured to be objects of relentless media inquiry and fan abuse and to struggle mightily. That, at least, was the assumption.

But assumption hasn't meshed with reality. Sure, some Mitchell names have been terrible this year, but seven-week slumps are not uncommon and plenty of players who weren't named in the report have been awful, too. We can divide the named players into four categories: plain awful, pretty much the same, thriving and pitchers. (Pitchers get their own category because, bizarrely, most are performing better.) Overall, a close look shows that players named in the Mitchell Report have experienced no on-field effect.

Plain awful

Gary Bennett (Dodgers), Jason Giambi (Yankees), Paul Lo Duca (Nationals), Gary Matthews (Angels), Gary Sheffield (Tigers)

It would be a stretch to conclude that the Mitchell Report had anything to do with the sad-sack state of this bunch. Sheffield and Giambi spoke openly about dabbling in steroids before the report

came out, and their struggles are not surprising given their ages (39 and 37, respectively). Matthews is 33 and had only one really good season in his 10-year career to begin with. Lo Duca has been hurt, typical for a 36-year-old catcher. Bennett, meanwhile, had just 21 at-bats entering the week.

Pretty much the same

Jack Cust (A's), Troy Glaus (Cardinals), Jose Guillen (Royals), Brian Roberts (Orioles), Gregg Zaun (Blue Jays), Howie Clark (just called up by the Twins)

Guillen got off to a brutal start in Kansas City, but he always has been a slow starter and has gotten his stroke back lately. Cust, too, struggled in April but is slowly rounding into form. For the most part, these guys are putting up the kind of numbers you'd expect. Their slugging percentages (except Roberts') are below their career norms, which might set off PED alarms, except that slugging

percentages are down significantly throughout baseball.

Thriving

Rick Ankiel (Cardinals), Jerry Hairston (Reds), Miguel Tejada (Astros)

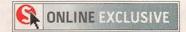
If the report has nothing to do with the poor



Guillen is coming around after a slow start to the season.

performance of guys in the first category, it also has nothing to do with the stellar play of these guys. Ankiel has done well in his first full year as an everyday player. Hairston was hot in Class AAA to start the year and has had a fast start with the Reds, but his numbers will come down. Tejada's resurgence considering the controversy about his

age and the fact that the FBI wants to know if he lied to congressional investigators—has been remarkable, but keep in mind that much of that can be credited to the bandbox he now calls home. Starting the week, Tejada was batting .394 with a .606 slugging percentage at Minute Maid Park.



Our Fantasy experts leave nothing to the imagination—they're on top of everything. Check them out at sportingnews.com.



Pitchers

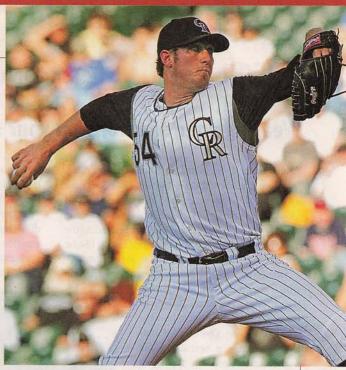
Paul Byrd (Indians), Ryan Franklin (Cardinals), Eric Gagne (Brewers), Matt Herges (Rockies), Kent Mercker (Reds), Andy Pettitte (Yankees), Scott Schoeneweis (Mets), Ron Villone (Cardinals)

Franklin, Herges and Schoeneweis are having the best seasons of their careers. If Byrd maintains his ERA (3.61), it will be his lowest in 10 years. Mercker, 40, has been serviceable for the Reds after missing 2007. Villone's ERA about matches his career average. Pettitte's ERA is up, but his performance has been consistent with that of his two previous years. Gagne has been a disaster for Milwaukee, but anyone who saw him in Boston last year knows that what has happened to him this season—as with everyone on the list—has nothing to do with his inclusion in the Mitchell Report. SN

NSIDE DISH

The unsung hero in the Astros' revival has been 2B Kazuo Matsui, back after surgery for anal fissures. He has solidified the top of the lineup ahead of 1B Lance Berkman and SS Miguel Tejada by working pitchers effectively (he has seen 4.19 pitches per plate appearance) and wreaking havoc with nine stolen bases in 10 attempts. But his contribution goes deeper. "Their defense was bad, really bad," says one N.L. scout. "They have not had a good sec-

ond baseman in a long time—they were kind of stuck with (Craig) Biggio there. But this guy gets to everything." The Astros were 6-10 without Matsui but 18-10 after his return. > Almost as soon as folks began calling for Texas manager Ron Washington's job, the Rangers won seven consecutive series. The key: Texas is finally getting some return on the contract (three years, \$33 million) it gave to RHP Vicente Padilla and, for a change, has been lucky in patching its rotation. Reclamation project RHP Sidney Ponson, sidearm RHP Scott Feldman and LHP Kason Gabbard (acquired in the Eric Gagne trade) have all pitched surprisingly well. The luck could be short-lived, though, and the Rangers won't seriously contend unless struggling RHP Kevin Millwood cuts down on his uncharacteristically high hits rate (1.3 per inning). > There was controversy in the Mets locker room when LHP Billy Wagner indicated that some teammates-1B Carlos Delgado likely among them-were not accountable because they were not around to answer questions from the media. Might that division be



The Rockies may have to lean more heavily on Reynolds than they expected.

trouble for manager Willie Randolph? "That team will either rally together or fall totally apart," says one general manager. "If they fall apart, he won't be around much past the (All-Star) break." > Of the game's many hyped pitching prospects, the one who might quietly prove most valuable is 6-7 Rockies RHP Greg Reynolds, the No. 2 overall pick in the 2006 draft. Colorado needs pitching to get back into contention, and Reynolds offered hope last week with six shutout innings in a home win against the Twins. > Cardinals RHP Jason Isringhausen has been getting knocked around and lost the closer job. He also landed on the disabled list after punching a television in frustration and suffering a laceration. But scouts say Isringhausen is just a tweak away from regaining his form. > Yankees manager Joe Girardi admitted last week that RHP Joba Chamberlain might remain in a relief role throughout the rest of the season, after all. G.M. Brian Cashman told reporters, "He's a reliever. That's his focus right now. That's where he's needed."

speedreads

The Cubs will have to learn to live with the ups and downs of having Alfonso Soriano in the leadoff spot. When he is hot—as he was last week, with seven homers in six games—he can carry the offense. When he isn't, he can be a drain. You'd like more consistency in the top spot, but manager Lou Piniella won't move him.

The Reds and Mariners are desperate teams. Cincinnati needs to get its young players, particularly outfielder Jay Bruce, up to the big leagues pronto. Seattle, built to win now, needs a boost on offense, so let's get that Ken Griffey trade done sooner rather than later.

Alex Rodriguez taped a message ahead of time to celebrate Manny Ramirez's 500th home run. Yankees-Red Sox camaraderie? If former Sox pitcher Bill Lee were dead, he'd be spinning in his grave.

THE CLOSER Todd Jones



Wearing your emotions on your sleeve is OK—if that's who you are

So a big deal was made out of Joba Chamberlain's fist pump. You know the one. Two days after Joba gave up a game-deciding, pinch-hit 3-run homer to David Dellucci, he struck out Dellucci in the eighth inning with two outs, no one on and the Yankees leading the Indians, 6-3. Afterward, Joba pumped his fist like he does most of the time. Boom, you've got a debate.

Joba, by the way, is the Yankees' big-time setup man

who is tossed about in the media as the savior of the Yankees' bullpen or the rotation, depending on how the rotation is faring. One day, he's putting out fires. The next day, Hank Steinbrenner blows his top about

When the game is on the line, guys handle pressure differently. It's not fair to say because Mariano acts one way, Joba should act the same.

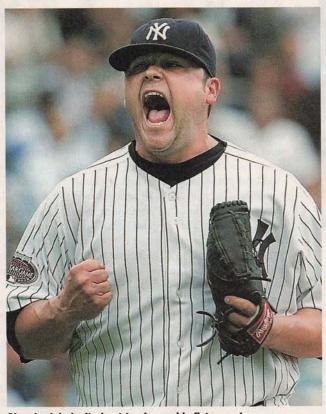
how that arm needs to be in the rotation. In other words, it's a waste of time and talent for Joba to help the Yankees make it a seven-inning game whenever they're leading. OK, OK, I'm ranting.

Back to the topic: Joba was accused of showing up the Indians and displaying way too much emotion. People all over the place, including Hall of Famer Goose Gossage, chimed in and said it was unprofessional and the game has no room for such behavior.

The thing is, players usually don't have problems with such antics as long as guys are consistent with their behavior. For example, guys never said a lot about Sammy Sosa's hop or Barry Bonds' pose because they hopped and posed all the time. You knew it wasn't an attempt to show you up. Sure, we'd like 'em all to hit their homers and run the bases like Chase Utley, Carlos Delgado or Derrek Lee, but they don't. But as long as guys act the same game after game, you just deal with it and move on.

A lot of guys have seen Joba's fist pump numerous times. I can tell you his raw emotion is why he's a cult hero at Yankee Stadium.

When the game is on the line, guys handle pressure differently. Mariano Rivera, for example, shows no emotion whatsoever, and that's fine. But it's not fair to say because Mariano acts one way, Joba should act the same. They're two different people. Joba is an aggres-



Chamberlain isn't about to change his fist-pumping ways.

sive pitcher. If he became too concerned about controlling his emotions, it might take away some of his aggressiveness.

Now one thing guys who show a lot of emotion have to be aware of is how such behavior can be a double-edged sword. If you draw attention to yourself after a good night, you'll eat crow from time to time after you have a bad one. The other guys will take extra satisfaction in beating you. As long as you're OK with that, most guys will cut you slack when you beat them and show emotion.

Joba says he's not changing. He's prepared to live with the good and the bad of being emotional out there. That's who he is. And that's also why he is pretty dominant on most nights.

The week ahead

May 22-25

Triumphant return Phillies closer Brad

Lidge returns to Minute Maid Park in grand style. After being booed out of Houston, Lidge has been the National League's top closer, converting his first 10 save opportunities. Says Phillies reliever J.C. Romero: "His slider is there, his fastball is there. But the big thing is he is having fun again."

May 23-25

Whipping boys

The Mariners will dutifully show up at Yankee Stadium to take another beating. Seattle has lost 14 of its past 19 games in the Bronx and 24 of its past 38 games against the Yankees overall. To make it worse, Yankees righthander Chien-Ming Wang is in line to start during the three-game series. He has a 7-0 career record and 2.39 ERA against the Mariners.

On the road again

The Red Sox begin their second 10-game trip this month with a visit to Oakland. The road swing continues to Seattle and concludes with a potentially rough stop in Baltimore. The Red Sox are 1-9 on the road against the American League East this season, and DH David Ortiz is hitting only .202 with a .340 slugging percentage on the road.

May 23-26

Webb is waiting

The Braves begin a four-game home series against the Diamondbacks with the knowledge that ace Arizona righthander Brandon Webb is scheduled to start the final game. Webb has two consecutive shutouts against Atlanta in which he allowed six total hits.

May 26-28

Central vs. Central

With the opening of a home series against the White Sox, the Indians are scheduled to play 13 of their next 17 games against A.L. Central rivals. The Indians were 48-24 against the division last year, but they are only 7-6 in intradivision games this season.

-Gerry Fraley

3UPA



Braun has the numbers and the money to go with them.

1 Ryan Braun.

He started slow, but, entering the week, Braun had hit .330 with eight homers and 21 RBIs in his past 25 games. He's only 24, but the eight-year deal he signed last week was the largest in Brewers history.

The Rays.

It's almost as if this tidbit slipped through the cracks, but the Rays are battling for first place in the A.L. East, and the Yankees are sitting in last. You would have thought at least Hank Steinbrenner would have noticed.

2 Albert Pujols.

We'll forgive the Cardinals slugger for failing to reach base last Friday. After all, getting on in each of his first 42 games isn't too shabby. Neither is his .349 batting average or 1.082 OPS.

3 DOWN

The Dodgers' top two starters have struggled in May, racking up a 1-4 record and 9.28 ERA.

J.R. Towles.

Towles, the Astros' rookie catcher, and first baseman Lance Berkman are hitting a combined .395 in May. Of course, Berkman is batting .579 (33-for-57) and Towles is plugging along at .034 (1-for-29).

The Tigers.

Sure, the Yankees are in last in the East, but they're only three games under .500. The Tigers are last in the Central, nine games under .500 and a pathetic 4-15 in division games. Out West, the



Penny (right) keeps turning up bad this season.

high-hope Mariners are 10 games under and 7½ behind the Angels.

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over again

Once he decides to move on, Dungy won't have any problem losing that game face.

By Clifton Brown

cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com

NFL ANSIDE

hen coaches with Super Bowl rings retire, they often return. Vince Lombardi, Bill Parcells, Dick Vermeil and Joe Gibbs all came back. Bill Cowher is expected to resurface in the near future.

ALOHOTOM

But when Tony Dungy leaves the Colts, I don't think he'll ever coach again. Not three years later, not five years later, not ever. It's not that Dungy doesn't love football. It's not that Dungy, 52, will be too old. But after 30 years in the NFL as a coach or player, he has a profound desire to impact people in a different way.

Dungy has already succeeded. His book, Quiet Strength, spent weeks on the New York Times best-seller list after it was released in 2007, and more then 900,000 copies have been sold. The memoir details how Dungy's Christian faith has helped him stay grounded through triumphs, like the Colts' Super Bowl victory, and cope with tragedies, like the suicide of his son James. The book has connected with folks who wouldn't know Matt Ryan from Ryan Seacrest. The way people have reacted to Dungy since the book came out only makes him more certain he will not feel lost without coaching.

"I think about doing so many things: working with the community, prison ministry and various organizations, spending more fam-

'I didn't come any closer to leaving this year than I have the past three or four years. That's just how it is now. After every season, I take some time off to reflect before I make a decision.'

-Tony Dungy

ily time," says Dungy. "I played for a great coach, Chuck Noll, who never came back. That's how I see myself. Once I leave football, I see myself being very busy, doing things that are meaningful to me."

A recent example occurred May 8, when Dungy spoke to about 1,700 students at Jefferson High School in Tampa. The teachers decided to use Dungy's book to inspire students to read. It worked. The school's principal, Dan Bonilla, says students have read the book and discussed it in class-and they were thrilled when Dungy showed up in

"Did they treat him like a rock star?" says Bonilla. "Yes, they did. But they also listened to every word. It's hard to measure how much a man like that can inspire our students. I've been doing this for a long time. It was the type of day that they'll never forget."

Dungy signed autographs and posed for pictures, but much of his talk centered on hard work and perseverance. He took that theme to heart when he decided to return to the Colts for at least one more season. Indianapolis' playoff loss to the Chargers was a bitter end to Dungy's bid to win back-to-back

Super Bowls. After that game, I saw him walk from his postgame news conference to his office. His face was solemn. His head was down. He looked tired, defeated, like someone who'd had enough.

I figured he had coached his last game, but I underestimated his resilience and love for the sport. Dungy's passion for football doesn't always bubble to the surface. He rarely screams at players or rants on the sideline. He doesn't sleep at the office or work into the wee hours of the morning. But talk to Dungy for more than two minutes and you get a clear picture. He is juiced for the upcoming season.

"I still love the game and the competition," he says. "I didn't come any closer to leaving this year than I have the past three or four years. That's just how it is now. After every season, I take some time off to reflect before I make a decision."

This season, Dungy will juggle coaching the Colts

and seeing his family, which has moved from Indianapolis to Tampa. Owner Jim Irsay has offered to let Dungy use the team's private plane to travel on Fridays to Tampa to see his son, Eric, play high school football.

Neither Dungy nor the Colts can afford to slack off, with the AFC South looking like the NFI's toughest division. The Jaguars and the Titans also made the playoffs last season, and even the last-place Texans finished 8-8. The Colts' streak of five consecutive division titles is one of the most impressive accom-

plishments of the Dungy era, but the Jaguars enter the season as a legitimate threat.

Dungy's contract runs through 2009, but he is not looking beyond this season, and assistant coach Jim Caldwell has already been named Dungy's eventual successor. How will Dungy know when it's time to leave?

"I'm really not sure," he says, laughing. "People keep telling me that I'll know. I guess it hasn't happened yet."

When it does happen, the NFL will miss Dungy. But I doubt he'll miss the NFL enough to return.

After making the Pro Bowl as a kick returner last season, Josh Cribbs believes he can help the Browns in other ways. Apparently, offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski agrees. Cribbs has been catching passes as well as taking handoffs during offsea-

son workouts. The Browns figure if Cribbs gets the ball in space more often, he can threaten defenses with the same open-field moves that have made him dangerous on returns. The Bears have benefited from getting **Devin Hester** involved in their offense. The Browns would love similar results from Cribbs. The Panthers feel better equipped to make opponents



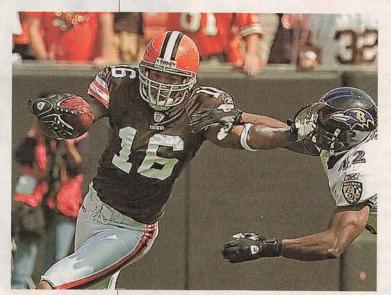
schedule in his recovery from elbow surgery. If Delhomme returns to form and rookie RB **Jonathan Stewart** adds pop to the running game, Smith could find himself running free more often.

It does not bode well for the Bucs that QB **Jeff Garcia**

and RB Earnest Graham want new contracts. Both are veterans who carry clout in the locker room, and if they continue to express their unhappiness, it could damage chemistry. Graham has skipped some voluntary workouts, and Garcia has hinted he could hold out during training camp. You can almost picture coach Jon Gruden making one of his faces. > Though

several teams have interest in WR Roy Williams, the Lions are not likely to trade him. Even if the Lions and Williams can't agree on a new deal, the team can place the franchise tag on him to keep him in Detroit through the 2009 season. Having Williams and Calvin Johnson at wideout is one of the Lions' strengths. There is no reason to break up that combo for anything less than an overwhelming offer. > Raiders QB JaMarcus Russell insists his weight will not be an issue. The 6-6 Russell says he weighed 269 pounds at minicamp and that he was never close to 300, as had been rumored during the offseason. A protracted training camp holdout ruined Russell's rookie season, and he wants to prove he was worthy of being a No. 1 pick. Russell has a big frame and will never be svelte, but he needs to get closer to his listed weight of 255 to

improve his mobility and stamina. A groin injury to Bengals LB Ahmad Brooks has slowed his transition from the middle to the strong side and is putting him in danger of losing his starting spot. First-round pick Keith Rivers has been playing on the weak side, MLB Odell Thurman has returned from his substance abuse suspension, and Daryl Blackstock has the inside track to start on the strong side.



With Cribbs in the mix on offense, the Browns will be even more dangerous.

pay for double-teaming WR Steve Smith. Muhsin Muhammad, who used to be an effective side-kick for Smith, has returned after a stint with the Bears. Offseason pickup DJ. Hackett adds depth to the receiving unit, and Dwayne Jarrett will get an opportunity for more playing time. Meanwhile, QB Jake Delhomme is ahead of

speedreads

Add Brian Urlacher's unhappiness to the list of the Bears' problems, which include Cedric Benson and a failure to address the quarterback spot. This team is having a bad offseason.

Neither Matt Ryan nor Joe Flacco can afford to miss training camp. If they are smart, they will not hold out and risk their chance to start.

The Browns want to win the AFC North. But considering how tough their schedule is, it would be impressive for them to make the playoffs as a wild card.



For more on what's happening in the NFL this offseason, read Clifton Brown at sportingnews.com.

AFC

Focus on LIN

- **Ravens** They fly to the ball, led by Ray Lewis and Bart Scott—also a good blitzer—on the inside. Terrell Suggs' sacks should rise again. Jarret Johnson is solid on the outside.
- **Chargers** You won't find a more athletic pair of outside guys than Shawne Merriman and Shaun Phillips. Stephen Cooper emerged as a force inside last season, and Matt Wilhelm improved against the run.
- **Steelers** LaMarr Woodley will be an impact player opposite James Harrison on the outside. James Farrior still has the speed to make big plays in the middle. Lawrence Timmons will challenge Larry Foote inside.
- Jaguars Middleman Mike Peterson is a potential Pro Bowl player, as is Daryl Smith on the outside. Starter Clint Ingram and reserve Justin Durant are up-and-comers outside. All are fast enough to play in pass coverage.
- **Patriots** Junior Seau, 39, has not yet decided if he's going to return, and Tedy Bruschi will turn 35 in June. Rookie Jerod Mayo has a good shot to start next to Bruschi inside. The Pats are set outside with Mike Vrabel and Adalius Thomas.
- **Chiefs** They're still waiting for Derrick Johnson to deliver. They signed Demorrio Williams to challenge Napoleon Harris. Williams would start outside, with Donnie Edwards moving into Harris' spot in the middle.
- **Raiders** Thomas Howard (weak side) and Kirk Morrison (middle) are emerging stars. Robert Thomas, who excels against the run, is the other projected starter.
- Titans Keith Bulluck and David Thornton have sideline-to-sideline speed and are good tacklers. Ryan Fowler, a physical run stopper who was hurt last year, is expected to reclaim his starting spot in the middle.
- **Texans** The only elite guy is DeMeco Ryans, a great run stopper inside. Morlon Greenwood returns on the outside opposite Zac Diles, who has good speed and a strong work ethic. Kevin Bentley is a versatile backup.
- **Bills** Paul Posluszny, Angelo Crowell and Kawika Mitchell have the potential to be a dynamic group. Posluszny is smart and plays with good instincts and awareness in the middle. Crowell covers a lot of ground.

liams is moving outside, where he can use his speed to flow to the ball. Boss Bailey's coverage skills will be key against TEs Tony Gonzalez and Antonio Gates. Newcomer Niko Koutouvides is likely to start inside.

12 Jets The inside of the 3-4 looks solid with David Harris and Eric Barton. The outside could have two new starters in rookie Vernon Gholston and Calvin Pace.

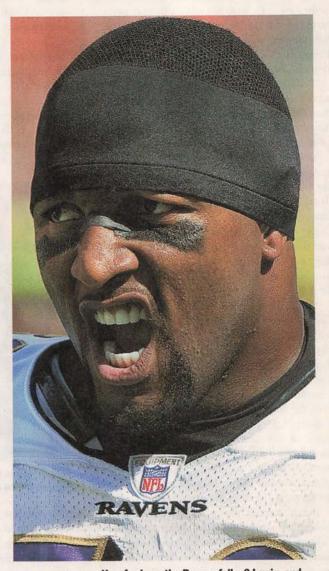
Browns Kamerion Wimbley slipped as an outside rusher last season. Willie McGinest, 36, still is the team's best run stopper on the outside. On the inside, D'Qwell Jackson is undersized but has superior instincts. Andra Davis is solid but not very athletic.

Colts Middle line-backer Gary Brackett is a perfect fit in the cover 2 scheme. The rest of the group is in the formative stage. Freddy Keiaho is instinctive and a big hitter. Tyjuan Hagler is mobile.

15 Bengals Rookie Keith Rivers is a significant upgrade on the out-

side. Darryl Blackstock will push Rashad Jeanty for playing time. The club hopes Odell Thurman, off a two-year suspension, can claim the middle spot from Ahmad Brooks.

16 Dolphins Channing Crowder, Reggie Torbor and Joey Porter are very good athletes, but all three will need to be bigtime playmakers to help replace the best linebacker in team history, Zach Thomas.



How far have the Ravens fallen? Lewis and the best group of linebackers in the AFC will try to answer that the only way they know how—by hitting everything that moves.



- 1. Shawne Merriman, Chargers
- 2. Ray Lewis, Ravens
- 3. James Harrison, Steelers
- 4. Mike Vrabel, Patriots
- 5. DeMeco Ryans, Texans

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

EBACKERS

NFC

1 Cowboys DeMarcus Ware and Greg Ellis form one of the league's best pass-rushing duos. On the outside, they get a lot of one-onone matchups—and win them. Bradie James is coming off an average year. Zach Thomas was signed for his leadership and playmaking ability.

2 Seahawks Lofa Tatupu leads the defense from the middle and uses his quickness and instincts to make plays. Leroy Hill is one of the best blitzers on the team. Julian Peterson, who like Tatupu, is a Pro Bowl player, steps up as a rush end in the nickel.

Bears Lance Briggs lines up on the weak side and makes plays from sideline to sideline just like his partner in the middle, Brian Urlacher. Hunter Hillenmeyer is steady over the tight end.

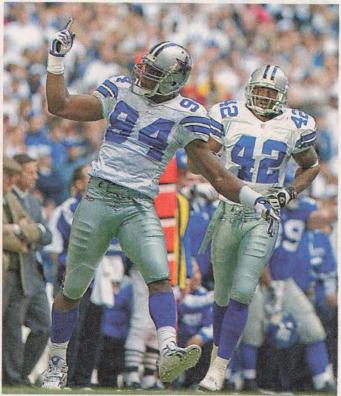
Bucs Derrick Brooks (weak side), Barrett Ruud (middle) and Cato June (strong side) are playmakers. June has great mobility and speed, Brooks showed more life last year, and Ruud has a year running the defense behind him.

Packers Nick Barnett (middle) and A.J. Hawk (weak side) form an athletic combination. Barnett has sideline-to-sideline range, but Hawk needs to make more big plays. Freeagent pickup Brandon Chillar and Brady Poppinga will compete on the strong side.

Vikings E.J. Henderson uses great instincts to get to the ball from the middle. Chad Greenway, on the weak side, is a younger version of strongside starter Ben Leber, who is proficient at blitzing, coverage and tackling.

Cardinals Free-agent pickup Travis LaBoy is battling Bertrand Berry on the weak side; both have pass-rushing skills. On the strong side, Chike Okeafor is being pushed by Clark Haggans. Karlos Dansby and Gerald Hayes are solid inside.

Panthers Jon Beason emerged as a star in the middle as a rookie, and Thomas Davis



Ware (94) forces teams to game-plan for him with his quick first step, power and ability to get the passer—he had 14 sacks in 2007.

finally appeared to understand his position on the strong side. The team added free agent Landon Johnson (Bengals) on the weak side.

Redskins Middle linebacker London Fletcher is a sure tackler. On the outside, Marcus Washington has been hampered by injuries. Rocky McIntosh is one of the team's best playmakers but has been slowed while recovering from knee surgery.

10 Giants Antonio Pierce deciphers offenses and gets his teammates lined up



- 1. DeMarcus Ware, Cowboys
- 2. Julian Peterson, Seahawks
- 3. Lofa Tatupu, Seahawks
- 4. Greg Ellis, Cowboys
- 5. Brian Urlacher, Bears

in the correct spots. On the strong side, Mathias Kiwanuka needs work on his coverage. Gerris Wilkinson is the leading candidate to start on the weak side.

11 49ers Patrick Willis is fast and instinctive inside. The team hopes Dontarrious Thomas wins the other inside spot. Outside, Manny Lawson is returning from an ACL tear. Tully Banta-Cain and Parys Haralson are battling for the other outside job.

12 Eagles Omar Gaither can cover tight ends and backs. He is moving to the weak side to accommodate Stewart Bradley, who showed flashes as a playmaker in the middle. Chris Gocong rushes the passer from the strong side.

Lions Ernie Sims has been playing at a Pro Bowl level on the weak side but hasn't had a lot of help. Paris Lenon will be moved to the strong side; rookie Jordon Dizon, an excellent tackler, will start in the middle.

14 Falcons Michael Boley is a force against the run and can cover. If rookie Curtis Lofton is ready in the middle, Keith Brooking could slide back to the weak side, where he made the Pro Bowl.

Rams Will Witherspoon isn't big enough to be consistently strong in the middle. Outside, Pisa Tinoisamoa must show he can stay healthy. Chris Draft has the edge over Quinton Culberson on the strong side.

16 Saints Jonathan Vilma is coming off knee surgery but might be the playmaker the team needs in the middle. Dan Morgan is trying to bounce back from injuries. If they aren't healthy, the team could go with Scott Fujita, Mark Simoneau and Scott Shanle, none of whom is a superb athlete.

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COLLEGE BASKETBALL INSIDER

Is it a slam dunk to spike the game's appeal? No, but it would help.

Making the case for a draft age of 20

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

hen the folks at Harris Interactive recently released their annual survey of America's most popular sports, basketball got slammed. Once ahead of baseball in the race to be a distant second to this nation's football obsession, the ratings for hoops have slipped to Beauty and the Geek territory.

I did my own little survey, less scientific, when speaking at Wright State's tipoff luncheon last November. To get an idea of how the NBA is viewed by typical college fans, I asked audience members to raise their hands if they had a negative view of the NBA. You'd have thought I had just offered them 23-cent pizzas.

Basketball is a great game, but the sport is fractured. We again were reminded of that when ESPN's Outside the Lines reported USC star O.J. Mayo was paid thousands of dollars by an agent's "runner" while Mayo played high school ball and one season with the Trojans.

Would an increase in the NBA's draft age minimum to 20 fix everything?

Goodness, no.

There's one reason I'm certain it's a good move, though: Many agents think it's a bad one.

Those who fought against NBA commissioner David Stern's original proposal for a 20-year age minimum-and helped get it cut in contract negotiations to the current 19—largely did because it's easier to

58 . SEE A DIFFERENT GAME 5/26/08

bamboozle high school kids. Agents are attaching themselves to younger players and do not want extended college careers to delay their payoffs. They might masquerade behind a concern about the rights of athletes to earn a living, but it's mostly about their own net worths.

For too long, there has been no attention paid to basketball's bottom line. In 1994, before the NBA's introduction of a rookie salary scale essentially invited high school players into the draft, 19 percent of Americans identified basketball-college (8 percent) or pro (11)—as their favorite sport. Now it's down to 8 percent, split evenly between the two. David Falk, who gained fame as Michael Jordan's agent, believes the players association should recognize how the decline in popularity affects them and support increasing the age minimum.

"The lack of connection with these superstars really hurts the business of sport," Falk told the Sports-

> Business Journal's Liz Mullen. Later, he added, "The point is all the players are making less money if the product is inferior."

Stern is not blameless in the decline, but he deserves credit for trying to reverse it. At the Final Four, the NBA and NCAA announced a partnership designed address concerns at the

> enhanced age minimum is not explicitly part of that initiative, but it would benefit the sport by delivering better trained better known

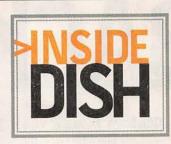
Mike DeCourcy explores

studs and duds at

sportingnews.com.

game's grass-roots level. An

players to the league.



G Jeremiah Rivers averaged only 2.5 points and shot just 31.8 percent as a Georgetown sophomore, but his intelligence and defensive skills have Indiana, Kentucky and Georgia Tech competing to land him as a transfer. Rivers will have two years of eligibility remaining starting in 2009-10. > Kentucky recently got three commitments from prospects who have vet to enter the 10th grade, including 6-8 PF Vinny Zollo of Greenfield, Ohio. What has surprised some rival coaches is that Zollo, like 6-7 Dakotah Euton a year ago, is not so esteemed as a prospect that locking him up early seemed necessary. > It's not often a mid-major beats the bigtimers for a prospect, but it's becoming a habit for Akron. Coach Keith Dambrot and assistant Jeff Boals are effectively working western Pennsylvania and recently got a commitment from 7-0 C Zeke Marshall of McKeesport, rated No. 61 in the class of 2009 by Scout.com. Marshall is thin and needs work on his body, but his rapid improvement led to contact from Florida, Kentucky, Vanderbilt and Maryland as well as local interest from Pitt. Two years ago, Akron swiped 6-9 Steve Swiech out of the same region despite interest from several high-level programs. > Memphis is pushing to place its annual game against Tennessee at a neutral site, Nashville, which would give it a unique quality and make it a regional event. But there is something to be said for the sizzling atmosphere that developed inside Memphis' FedEx Forum when the two teams met in late February as the nation's No. 1 and No. 2 teams.

speedread

At its recent meeting, the NCAA rules committee suggested only a few minor outlawed dunking and not long ago tried to introduce the trapezoid lane, that's progress.



tweaks to the game. For a group that once

COLLEGE FOOTBALL INSIDER

Bigger doesn't always mean better.

The ACC will never be the SEC

By Matt Hayes

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ook, I don't want to go off just because it's easier to react and attack than reflect and respect. That said, I can hold these thoughts no longer: The ACC blew it when it expanded to 12 teams.

As we head into the fourth season of the 12-team ACC, it's obvious things just aren't working out—at least on the field. This, everyone, is what happens when money dictates change.

"There were numerous reasons for expansion," says ACC commissioner John Swofford.

At the top of the list: greed and envy. There's a reason those are two of the seven deadly sins.

In the three seasons since the ACC grew to 12, it has yet to win a BCS bowl game—in fact, the conference has lost its last eight BCS games—and hasn't sniffed the national title chase. No big-boy conference has a worse record in the elite bowl games.

By comparison, the SEC has won three national titles in the past five seasons and has the best record of all conferences in BCS bowls since the format was adopted in 1998. Why do I bring up the SEC? Because the SEC is part of the reason the ACC is in this mess.

The ACC has always had a little brother complex when it comes to the SEC. Frankly, it's a ridiculous notion—but one that is strong both at the administrative level of the league and within the fan base.

The SEC became a behemoth by expanding to 12 teams in 1992 and adding a championship game. Then came the exclusive network television contract with CBS. No other league gets guaranteed network national television games every week—it's unheard of.

So why wouldn't the ACC follow that plan? The problem: It's a basketball league, and it wasn't ready.

Other than at Florida State and Clemson, football wasn't—and still isn't—a priority in the ACC. Moreover, league administrators oversold the value

speedread

Imagine, if you will, the president of Jacksonville State explaining to the school's board of trustees why he accepted troubled quarterback Ryan Perrilloux into his university: "Let's win a championship!"

of adding Miami and Virginia Tech to boost the football quotient and compounded the problem by placing the league championship game in the heart of the SEC in Jacksonville, Fla.

Instead of placing the game in Charlotte—in the heart of Tobacco Road—and leaving it there for a distinct identity, the game will be played in yet another SEC hot spot (Tampa) for the next two years before finally arriving in Charlotte in 2010.

By then, it will be too late.

Last week, the ACC held its annual spring meetings and boasted about producing more NFL first-round draft picks (25) over the past three years than any conference.

"The draft tells you where the talent is," says North Carolina coach Butch Davis.

And that statement tells you where the ACC is.

The conference that changed because of greed is embracing the league of gluttony to pump up its image.



Look for dynamic WR **Derrick**Williams to stay inside as a slot
receiver in the Penn State
offense after moving there
this spring. Williams played
in the slot during his freshman season but was moved
outside to flanker and struggled with jams the past two

years. The staff wants to isolate Williams on slower linebackers and safeties instead of forcing him to win individual battles on the outside.

The re-recruitment of QB Keith Nichol, who is transferring from Oklahoma, could end up as a Michigan-Michigan State battle. Landing Nichol, who originally committed to Michigan State in 2006 before former coach John L. Smith was fired, could help stop the public relations

Penn State hopes moving Williams back to the slot will take advantage of his skills—and hide his weaknesses.

bleeding for Michigan coach
Rich Rodriguez. > Expect

South Carolina to take a long look at incoming freshman QB Aramis Hillary in fall camp. Neither Tommy Beecher (the projected starter) nor Chris Smelley played well this spring—and coach Steve Spurrier's most effective offense in Columbia was in 2006 when he had dual-threat QB Syvelle Newton. Hillary can run the zone-read play but will have only four weeks to pick up Spurrier's pass scheme.







Foul play of the day

With a couple of highly alert kids standing by in case they were needed, this fan went glove to glove with Twins first baseman Justin Morneau, giving new life to Rockies slugger Matt Holliday—who then doubled and scored the tying run in the seventh inning of a 3-2 Colorado victory last week.

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